銃皇無尽のファフニール

アメジスト・リバース

VIII

ツカサ

Illustration

梱枝りこ

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再び湖の岸に出た時――
俺は思いがけないものを目にする。

『え――？』

驚いた顔でこちらを振り向き、
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Prologue

The crossdressing girl who belonged to the special forces team Sleipnir─Jeanne Hortensia─possessed rare "eyes."
Long-range vision discerning objects faraway, dynamic vision capturing objects moving at high speed, peripheral vision providing full awareness of everything within view─
Despite such excellent vision in all respects, what was truly outstanding about her was the mental functions capable of processing the information obtained through sight.
Her eyes were so sensitive that the information conveyed to her brain was more than ten times that of a normal person. By processing this information meticulously, she also commanded high-level spatial perception and situational judgment.
So-called intuition was based on information provided by the senses of sight, hearing, smell and touch; sensory predictions borne from heuristics.
In Jeanne's case, vision alone already secured sufficient information to drive intuitive decisions.
Information obtained through vision was the fastest since light was the medium.
Consequently, her intuition was keener than other people's without needing to depend on input from sound or smell.
Asgard's laboratory at Tokyo, Japan─Fourth floor underground.
Witnessing the awakening of the Kraken's child, she immediately made the split-second decision to retreat.
A tiny split had appeared on the silver tentacle... The instant Jeanne caught sight of the purple eye through the gap, she understood faster than anyone else.
Over there was a monster that she could not handle.
Leaving behind the lab director Miyazawa Kenya, standing there petrified in surprise, Jeanne went back in reverse along the same way she had infiltrated the lab.
Reaching the ground took five minutes.
Due to electrical systems being down, the lab's premises were shrouded in darkness. The security system was also silent.
Wanting to get out the sooner the better, Jeanne was racing to the perimeter fence when calamity struck.

Part of the lab's front yard, a neatly trimmed lawn, swelled up, then dirt and soil was blown up into the sky.
This left a deep hole as a result.
Looking down the bottomless pit, Jeanne felt a chill run along her spine.
─It was coming.
Seeing the purple glow amidst the darkness, Jeanne turned around and ran as hard as she could.
However, it came chasing. Jeanne could feel the presence approaching, cleaving apart obstacles.
─Why me?
The question surfaced in her mind, but she did not even have the leisure to look back.
Continuing to escape while avoiding populated areas, Jeanne then heard a small crying sound.
"...Huh?"
Surprised, Jeanne looked back─And saw it.
Chasing after her was the figure of a young and crying girl.
The girl's eye glowed purple while her long hair undulated eerily.
Totally non-human, it would not be wrong to call that a monster's appearance.
However, the girl's countenance bore neither hostility nor the intent to kill.
In the darkness, Jeanne's excellent vision accurately read information from the girl's facial expression in the distance.
It was unease, sadness and yearning.
The girl was yearning for her. That was what Jeanne intuited.
Immediately, Jeanne's fear subsided, because she understood that despite being a monster wielding astonishing power, more importantly, she was just a crying child.
Halting her footsteps, Jeanne waited for the girl to approach.
Using her silver hair as wires, the girl destroyed everything in her path while advancing.
Despite getting hit by flying debris, Jeanne did not evade.
She had seen many examples of such children before.
Lost and helpless children, whose parents had died in battlefields.
Jeanne herself─was one of them.
The majority of those who enlisted in the military at this age were of such backgrounds.
Seeing that Jeanne had stopped moving, the girl stopped crying and showed surprise on her face.
"It's okay. I won't run anymore."
As Jeanne looked her in the eye and told her, the girl broke into a desperate run.
With silver hair fluttering, the light sound of footsteps, the girl rushed at Jeanne─and hugged her.

Then she began to cry again, loud enough to echo in the surroundings, clutching Jeanne's clothing tightly.
Seeing the girl's flowing tears, Jeanne was convinced.
This child was─human.

*

"She is... not a dragon. Like us, she is—Human."
At the house where Mononobe Mitsuki used to live with her original family, in the second-floor bedroom...
Thus murmured the awakened Jeanne Hortensia, recalling her encounter with the girl.
In front of Jeanne, surprised expressions surfaced on the faces of two girls.
Kili Surtr Muspelheim and Lisa Highwalker.
Jeanne had heard from Kili and Lisa that the girl─Kraken Zwei─was going to be put down as a dragon.
But after actually meeting the girl, Jeanne had come to understand that unlike other dragons, Kraken Zwei was not a monster impossible to communicate with.
"Human... You keep saying that, Jeanne-cha─No, but weren't you captured by that thing? I nearly got killed, going all-out to rescue you."
Kili remarked with displeasure. She almost used Jeanne's real name but Jeanne usually called herself "John" under a man's guise.
Jeanne was extremely afraid of her real gender coming to light. Despite finding it a nuisance, Kili reluctantly accommodated.
"Captured...? No, that wasn't what happened─I'm certain that..."
Jeanne felt her own body. In surprise, she swallowed the remainder of her sentence.
"What happened? Could you share in greater detail?"
Seeing Jeanne's puzzled look, Lisa asked in a serious voice.
Placing her hand on her own chest, Jeanne answered in a perplexed voice.
"I'm... supposed to be dead─It was when I tried to protect her."

Chapter 1 - Deep Forest Vacation

Part 1

Breaths leaked out regularly from between the sleeper's soft, pink lips.
The small but beautifully shaped bosom heaved up and down in sync with her breathing.
Her pale skin felt a little cold to the touch of one's fingertip.
However—Pulsation of the heart and warmth definitely resided in the depths of her body.
"Mitsuki..."
Staring at my adopted sister—Mononobe Mitsuki—who continued to remain unconscious, I called her name softly.
Nevertheless, there was no answer.
According to Vritra, whose poison had rendered her unconscious, she would not wake until several days later.
Although reassured that her life was not in danger, I could not help but have lingering worries.
"Are you okay, Mononobe? I'll watch over Mitsuki-chan, so why don't you rest for a bit?"
Just then, the silver-haired girl—Iris Freyja—asked worriedly.
I looked around to see my other classmates staring at me.
The current location was an infirmary inside a NIFL base. After the battle against Vritra ended, we were taking a break inside this spacious room where many beds were lined up.
The doctors and nurses meant to be stationed here were absent, thus forcing us to tend to our own wounds.
Fortunately, with no major injuries, nothing more than scratches, there was no problem at all, but somehow, the atmosphere was rather unsettling.
The lack of visible people was not evidence of absence. I could sense their presence outside the door.
From the first moment when we arrived at this base, we could already sense that NIFL soldiers were not very friendly towards Ds.
Despite providing a place for us to rest, it felt more like quarantine or house arrest.
"I'm fine. On the other hand, Iris, don't you look sleepy?"
I felt concerned about Iris' heavy eyelids.
It was presently midnight, time for fatigue and drowsiness to attack in unison.

"Ahaha, I'm definitely sleepy. But somehow, this isn't the right mood for sleeping..."
Smiling wryly, Iris looked around the room.
In the form of a young girl, Vritra was smiling confidently despite being bound by wooden vines. Everyone else was bearing a grim expression.
This was only natural. After Kili, the dragon marks of Iris, Ariella, Ren and Mitsuki had started to change color too.
'A second-generation hybrid dragon is capable of mating with all Ds, causing all their dragon marks to change in color. No exceptions—every last one of them.'
After the battle, this was what Vritra had told us.
If what she said was true, both Tia and Firill, who had not faced Kraken Zwei in battle, and even Lisa, who was not currently present, would all eventually become marked as mates.
Everyone as long as they were categorized as Ds, and possibly myself included even as a man—
Moreover, Vritra had proceeded to deliver even more shocking words.
'The third generation, born from a second-generation hybrid dragon and a D who has become its mate, will be even closer to humans. The third generation thus engendered will even be able to mate with ordinary humans who do not possess the ability to generate dark matter.'
'In this manner, the human species shall evolve, evolving into the resilient lifeforms known as dragons—'
Her story was difficult to swallow, but impossible to refute seeing as it was true that multiple Ds had been marked as mates.
Why did Vritra want to turn humans into dragons?
Vritra had refused to answer the question, remaining silent ever since.
"Hmm.... It feels itchy somehow."
Bothered by her dragon mark that was changing in color, Ariella tried to roll up her uniform from the back.
This was to check her dragon mark that seemed to be located on her abdomen.
"─Wait, Ariella Lu. Do not expose your skin carelessly."
Shinomiya-sensei, who was operating a small terminal at the wall, called out sharply to stop her.
"There are eyes and ears all around. Do not forget that we are currently in a very precarious position."
Shinomiya-sensei was hinting for us avoid incurring NIFL's suspicions regarding the color change of dragon marks.
Among NIFL's courses of action regarding Ds with dragon marks that had changed color was the option of elimination. I was reminded of what had happened with Iris last time.
Therefore, the fact that all Ds could potentially become marked must not fall into NIFL's knowledge so easily.

"But... Since we were outside when we checked earlier, it might've become an open secret already."
Firill turned her gaze to the door and murmured worriedly.
"Even if that were true, there is no need to provide them with additional information. So long as we deny the fact, NIFL cannot take a forceful position. Midgard's top priority is securing the lives and human rights of Ds. Even if information has to be shared, it must take place after your safety is ensured."
Shinomiya-sensei announced with a resolute attitude.
Gaining awareness that they were backed by Midgard, the girls showed relieved expressions surfacing on their faces.
"But how much longer are we staying here? Tia wants to see Lisa sooner. Tia wants to go back to Yuu's house!"
Sitting on the edge of a bed, Tia complained in boredom.
"Mm... I don't like it here either."
Ren agreed idly with Tia.
"No matter what you say, this is a NIFL base and leaving requires their permission. If we leave on our own, that will give them a pretext to take action and who knows what they will do."
"They refuse to grant us permission to leave?"
I asked with a frown.
"Yes, all they've done is insist that we wait patiently. By this point─"
Purururururu─
While Shinomiya-sensei was talking, my portable terminal's ringtone sounded.
An unknown caller.
After getting Shinomiya-sensei's permission, I took the call, only to hear a familiar voice vibrating against my eardrum.
'Hello, Mononobe-kun.'
"Director Miyazawa?"
I answered in surprise.
Finding out that her father was on the phone, Ren turned her gaze towards me.
'Yes, is it okay to speak right now? There are things I wish to convey to you as soon as possible.'
Miyazawa Kenya's voice did not show his usual confidence.
For some reason, I gathered an impression of anxiety.
"I suppose it's okay but... What on earth─"
'You know a Major Loki Jotunheim, yes? Namely, your former superior officer.'
"..."
Hearing that unexpected name, I gasped.
Somehow, Miyazawa Kenya and him...
'I encountered him and we exchanged a few words. Mononobe-kun─He knows everything.'

An intense chill ran down my spine.
Everything─Although Miyazawa Kenya did not state outright, he likely meant the matter of dragon marks changing color.
'Major Loki is apparently preparing to take forceful measures. You would be advised to be careful. Also, he had a message for you.'
"A message...?"
In response to my question, he inhaled and said:
'You are the one making the choice.'
His voice felt so cold that I felt as though Major Loki was whispering in my ear.
Rather than the content, it was the voice that made my body stiffen more.
"And what are... the choices?"
'I'm totally at a loss even if you ask me that question. In any case, I have passed the message along. Oh, although I am in no position to say this... I entrust Ren in your hands.'
Without waiting for my response, he hung up on his own.
As I took the portable terminal from my ear, I was greeted with questioning gazes from everyone.
"A call from Director Miyazawa... NIFL─Major Loki is making a move."
After I summarized the call concisely, Shinomiya-sensei sighed heavily.
"Time does not afford us the luxury of taking things slowly. No other way─there may be future repercussions but I will ask her to invoke her power."
Saying that, Shinomiya-sensei took out her portable terminal.
Something akin to fear could be glimpsed momentarily from her expression─

Part 2

"—Hmm, I see. Got it."
This was the fortified island of Midgard in the sea far south of Japan.
Located at the top floor of the academy's clock tower in the center of the island was her—Charlotte B. Lord's—office.
A petite figure not too different from a teenager's, a young face, matched with long blonde hair and blue eyes, she looked like a fairy living in the clock tower.
However, she was Midgard's chief administrator as well as the academy's principal.
Reclining securely against the large executive chair, she exuded solemnity as befitted a leader.
"Leave it to me, Haruka. I am humanity's sovereign crowned with the name of 'Gray.' Let me rescue you and the students from your predicament by invoking the authority I inherited from my father."
Ending her call with Shinomiya Haruka, the girl put down the receiver and turned her gaze to the woman standing by on the side.
The tall woman, dressed in a maid uniform, was showing a somewhat grave expression.
"Mica—I know what you wish to say but this is an emergency. My lovely maidens are facing a crisis. If I don't use my power now, when else!?"
Seeing Charlotte insiste fervently, the secretary—Mica Stuart—emitted a deep sigh.
"Charlotte-sama, regardless, I must correct you first. They are not yours. Moreover, I believe there is a huge problem regarding the use of authority."
"Problem?"
"Charlotte-sama, NIFL is in the process of eliminating your influence completely. There are no 'contractors' within the organization who can be controlled using your authority. During the Leviathan battle, we were unable to stop the invasion mounted by NIFL's forces."
Mica explained in a calm tone of voice, but Charlotte grinned fearlessly.
"I know that, but think carefully about it. That situation was different from now. If direct interference is out of the question, we'll just have to mount an offense from the top and the surroundings."
"The top and the surroundings—namely, Asgard and influential figures in Japan?"
Mica asked after thinking briefly.

"Indeed, list out the people who have made *deals* with us."
"As you wish."
Glancing at MIca as she took out a portable terminal and started operating it, Charlotte then looked up at the ceiling.
"—That being said, indirect methods have their limits. Things would be fine if Kraken Zwei kept still and stayed sealed at the bottom of the hole... But we'll have to dispose of her if she starts to move. However, the marked Ds cannot be sent to the frontline under those circumstances..."
Although they had failed to defeat Kraken Zwei, at least they managed to dig out a giant hole using Catastrophe, then plug its opening using mithril, thereby sealing Kraken Zwei inside.
But in the event that Kraken Zwei broke out of the opening, all Ds would turn into uncertain factors that could become dragons.
"No... To assert that all Ds will end up this way would be jumping to conclusions. Perhaps my friend might be the exception—"
Recalling the image of the only young man she acknowledged as her friend, Charlotte murmured.
If the report were true, his dragon mark was supposed to change color sooner or later, but she was pondering the possibility he might be the sole exception.
Charlotte did not think this just because he was a man.
Due to Kraken Zwei appearing as a girl, one might reason that being male, he would be even more suitable as a mate instead.
But ever since she came to know of his existence... Charlotte had always harbored doubts.
Ds were beings supposed to be all females... Yet he was the sole man among them.
Was he truly a D?
A dragon's power—an ability that Charlotte's father had called an authority —was inheritable.
Just as Mitsuki had obtained the power to create the Kraken's antimatter and Charlotte had inherited her father's title and ability, so-called authorities were abilities that did not rely on congenital aptitude.
Then having acquired Leviathan and Hraesvelgr's powers, had Mononobe Yuu received the power to generate dark matter under certain serendipitous circumstances?
It was merely speculation.
However, the answer might be coming to light very soon.
If he did not end up marked by a dragon, it could prove that he was not a D by birth.
"But by this point, it doesn't really matter what he is."
Charlotte smiled wryly and reached for the chessboard on her office desk.
"From my standpoint, I'm happy enough as long as we can have fun together again. Hence—Don't you die on me."

Using her fingertip, Charlotte flicked a knight piece towards her faraway friend.

Part 3

"—How unexpected. I can't believe they let us go so easily, even going as far as to provide a vehicle for transportation..."
On a bumpy ride in a military transport, I commented to Shinomiya-sensei.
Once the confinement order was lifted, we took the unconscious Mitsuki and left the NIFL base. Roughly half an hour had elapsed since. Driving along a mountain road that lacked street lighting, the vehicle was surrounded by darkness with only the headlights and the stars in the sky as light sources.
"Because the principal negotiated on our behalf, NIFL cannot overtly interfere with us for now."
Shinomiya-sensei answered while keeping her eyes on the road.
"Where are we going next? Back to Nanato City?"
I was sitting in the front passenger seat. To avoid waking up Iris and the others, who were sleeping in the back seats, I continued the conversation quietly. Right now, it was past 2am.
The poisoned Mitsuki was not the only person sleeping. Iris, Tia, Firill, Ariella and Ren, all five of them were currently fast asleep.
The only ones awake were myself and Shinomiya-sensei—as well as Vritra who was sitting on my lap.
"No, returning to that town would be very dangerous while it is uncertain how the situation will develop next. Your parents and innocent people might get caught up in danger."
"Then—"
"Don't worry. By pulling strings, the principal has secured a location that's suitable as a stronghold for us, which is where we're currently heading. Lisa Highwalker and the others are expected to meet us there."
Shinomiya-sensei controlled the steering wheel carefully, driving along the winding and treacherous mountain road while telling me about future plans.
"...Hey."
Sitting on my lap, Vritra called out in displeasure.
"What?"
"Do not give me 'what.' This treatment offendeth me greatly."
A vine was entangling her entire body to restrict her freedom. Vritra squirmed forcibly and glared at me. According to Tia, this vine was very similar to Yggdrasil's clone that had caused a huge commotion at Midgard's school festival.

Even if Vritra generated dark matter, the vine would automatically steal it, transmuting more vine to tie her up. Hence, Vritra was unable to perform transmutation even while Tia slept.
Tia's ability to control this kind of power was an indication that her synchronization with Yggdrasil was proceeding smoothly.
Tia needed Yggdrasil's knowledge in order to enter a discussion with Vritra. Although Vritra had given up on that discussion... For the sake of understanding Vritra's objective, Tia still spent time to synchronize cautiously.
Once Tia obtained Yggdrasil's knowledge, we should be able to understand many things.
After all, Vritra was keeping silent, refusing to reveal her true goal. I was just thinking that she finally opened her mouth again, but it ended up being irrelevant complaints.
"Thy lap is too hard and uncomfortable. There is still space in the back. Allow me to sit in the back."
Vritra pouted while demanding improved treatment. Since she had taken the form of a young girl, her facial expression looked quite cute—But I could not agree to her demand.
"No. Who knows what you'll do even if we've prevented you from performing transmutation. I can't put you together with everyone who's sleeping."
"...Art thou saying that one must maintain this posture the whole time?"
"Yes. In my case, I can detect killing intent even when I'm asleep. I'll know if you try anything, so don't get any funny ideas."
I yawned while I warned her. I had no intention of staying awake the whole time to monitor her.
"Hmm... Thou adamantly refusest to modify the arrangement at hand? Ah—Hath this body of mine incited lust in thee?"
"What!? C-Cough, c-cough, what nonsense are you suddenly spouting—"
Confronted with an unexpected accusation, I coughed and questioned.
"'Tis a law of nature for males to be aroused by females. Art thou intending to enjoy a female body whilst I am immobilized..."
Vritra looked up at me with an icy cold gaze.
"No way in hell I'd do that! I sat you on my lap because of spatial constraints—Wait, don't you start looking at me so coldly too, Shinomiya-sensei!"
Seeing slight revulsion in Shinomiya-sensei's expression, I protested.
"Oh no, my apologies. Although I do understand the situation... There is an air of criminality when you have a little girl tied up, sitting on your lap."
"Urgh..."
Precisely because of Shinomiya-sensei's calm attitude, her observation stabbed deeply into my heart.

"Hmph, do as thou please if molesting my body is thine intention. 'Tis a temporary body after all. Although 'twould be unpleasant... Having lost in battle, I must accept the way things are."
Looking like she had resigned herself, Vritra leaned her back against me. A whiff of fragrance from her black hair revived memories from my dance with Kili at the Principality of Erlia.
—This is the same scent.
"Hmm, this maketh for better seating. My posterior hurteth no longer."
Due to her moving around on top of me, I found it a little difficult to calm my thoughts, but I took care not to let it show on my face. At the same time, I said to her:
"...Just sit in relaxing posture. Don't worry, I won't lay my hands on you. After we meet up with Kili and the rest, I'll ask her to take over supervising you, so please bear with it for now."
If I had to keep watch over Vritra twenty-four hours a day, not just Shinomiya-sensei but even Iris and the rest of the girls were probably going to start viewing me with strange gazes.
"Oh? In other words, thou art not so deprived of females that thou needst to make a move on me? Indeed, 'tis true. Thou art surrounded by so many females, 'tis only natural."
Vritra glanced at the back seats and shrugged.
"Mononobe Yuu... Is that true? What unmentionable things have you done to them—"
Immediately, Shinomiya-sensei questioned me in a low voice.
"I-I haven't done anything! Vritra, please stop talking."

"Hmm... From my standpoint, I have no wish to displease thee either. This human body also needeth rest, hence I shall heed thy counsel, to shut up and sleep."
Consequently, Vritra closed her eyes and entered a state of slumber.
Although she had already displeased me greatly, I did not have the energy to protest.
After I sighed in resignation, Shinomiya-sensei apologized to me.
"My apologies. As a former D, I am not too familiar with men, so I accidentally believed what Vritra said."
Shinomiya-sensei scratched her cheek in embarrassment.
"Oh no, don't worry about that—"
I frantically shook my head to tell her I did not mind.
Indeed, it was understandable that she would lack a lot of knowledge if she had been living in Midgard where there were no other men.
Although her dauntless attitude and rank as colonel contributed to her image as a mature woman... She was still quite young, most likely twenty or so.
When talking to her normally like this, the impression I got was that of an older sister with a narrow age gap.
Because not too long ago, she used to be a student at Midgard just like me.
"—Shinomiya-sensei, you used to be the Counter-Dragon Squad's captain, right? I heard Mitsuki mention that everyone idolized you."
Shinomiya-sensei smiled wryly at my question.
"Praised as outstanding talent and getting carried away—I did go through such a phase indeed. However, my abilities were nothing special, because I couldn't even save a single person, my younger sister."
Shinomiya-sensei's words made me realize—
Like Mitsuki, she was shouldering a heavy cross due to Shinomiya Miyako's death.
During the Kraken battle two years ago, Shinomiya-sensei's younger sister, Miyako, had turned into a dragon and was killed by Mitsuki's own hand.
And the one who had issued the order to attack was Shinomiya Haruka, the Counter-Dragon Squad captain at the time.
"Regret over that incident was what made me stay in Midgard even after losing my powers. The principal offered me a chance for atonement. That being said, even to this day, I still haven't been able to save anyone by my own power."
Shinomiya-sensei spoke in a tone of self-deprecation but I disagreed with her.
"No way, I'm sure there are people whose lives were saved thanks to your unerring judgment."
"I'm very happy that you can say that, but the one who has been turning every crisis around is you. I am sincerely grateful to you that there has been no more victims like Miyako."

Shinomiya-sensei took one hand off the steering wheel and patted me lightly on the head. Smaller than imagined, it was a woman's hand, soft and warm.
Regarding the arrival of Kraken Zwei—what could be considered her sister's daughter—She must feel equally shocked as Mitsuki. But even so, she did not forget her position as the commander.
Just like two years ago, she did not forsake her duties as captain of the Counter-Dragon Squad—
"...Thank you very much."
Rewarded by a woman like her, that was all I could say in response.
"You should rest too. Vritra has long fallen asleep."
I took a closer look to see Vritra sleeping soundly against me. Her sleeping face was so innocent that it made me feel like a fool for being so wary of her.
"Yes, understood."
However, I still could not free myself of nervous feelings even after closing my eyes.
The sense of despair when I saw Mitsuki collapse to the ground—
That was something I did not want to experience ever again.

Part 4

"Hmm... That was a good sleep. The air is so fresh."
Iris got off the car, stretched and breathed in the morning air comfortably.
"—Is this the stronghold?"
I looked up at the two-story residence that looked white and hazy in the morning mist and asked Shinomiya-sensei.
After traveling several hours by car, we had arrived at a villa deep in the mountains.
"...Looks like a rich person's vacation home."
Ren rubbed her eyes and said.
The others were looking around with drowsiness still visible on their faces.
Although this was clearly far out in the woods, the trees and garden were trimmed and very well kept.
I was carrying the unconscious Mitsuki on my back. As for Vritra, who was bound by a vine, she was showing an expression of displeasure because Tia was holding the other end of the vine.
"Indeed. This is a vacation home belonging to someone in a position of power. The entire mountain is part of the premises. Surveillance cameras and other security systems are very well-equipped. We will instantly know if anyone intrudes into the premises."
After listening to Shinomiya-sensei's explanation, Ariella commented in amazement.
"That's amazing. Rather than a vacation home, it feels more like a safehouse."
"Yes, this place is also designed for hiding important people. Since the communications equipment is top-notch, we won't be isolated on the intelligence front. Medical facilities are apparently available too."
Shinomiya-sensei spoke while advancing towards the villa and we followed.
"Look, Mononobe-kun, over there is a tennis court."
"Yuu, there's a pretty garden!"
Firill and Tia pulled my arms and pointed at what they had discovered.
"...What kind of bigshot does this vacation home actually belong to?"
This was not a place that could be managed by someone who just had a bit of money.
There was also the fact that NIFL had let us go so easily... The principal must have persuaded someone quite high up. That person's level was likely near the top of the country.

Charlotte calling herself humanity's sovereign might not be an exaggeration.
"I was told that a caretaker normally lives here, but to prevent him from getting roped into our problems, he was asked to evacuate. There is plenty of food here and the facilities can be used freely."
Shinomiya-sensei looked back over her shoulder and explained to us.
"Okay, Mononobe, play tennis with me."
"Sure, if I can get some rest first... Iris, you're so energetic."
Seeing that Iris was the only person in high spirits, I could not help but smile wryly.
"Yeah. Maybe it's because I had a good sleep, my body is in excellent condition. If it's now, I feel like I won't lose to anyone!"
Iris made a movement as though swinging a tennis racket.
"—Iris Freyja, please save the fun and games for after the strategy meeting. *They* should have arrived before us..."
Just as Shinomiya-sensei finished, the villa's door opened from within.
"You guys are so slow. We've had enough of waiting."
"We have waited a long time, everyone."
Kili Surtr Muspelheim and Lisa Highwalker appeared.
I had no idea where this villa was located but perhaps it was relatively close to Nanato City. That or Kili and Lisa might have flown over here.
Then someone else appeared behind them—A blond young man.
"John! You woke up!"
Seeing John Hortensia, who used to be in the same team as me in NIFL, safe and sound, I called to him loudly.
Kili had rescued him after he was captured by Kraken Zwei and brought him to us. I was very worried because he was originally in a coma, but he had evidently regained consciousness.
"Yes, sorry for worrying you. I'm glad you are safe and sound too, Captain."
John answered in relief but for some reason, his expression quickly became shrouded in gloom.
"What's wrong?"
"Umm, Captain, about the Kraken's child, there's something I need to tell—"
Rumble~~...
John was just about to speak under a somber atmosphere when a cute sound was heard.
I looked around, only to see Tia holding her stomach, blushing.
"Tia is hungry..."
"—Let us share information over breakfast, shall we? I happen to be preparing breakfast, so it will be done soon."
Lisa smiled with an expression of "no helping it" and waved to everyone.
"I'll come help you after I move Mitsuki to her room."
I loaded the unconscious Mitsuki onto my back while I spoke. After staring worriedly at Mitsuki in her deep sleep, Lisa renewed her morale and smiled.

"Very well—I look forward to your help, fufu... Cooking together with you brings back memories of the school festival."

The mountain villa was designed with an open layout. The living room opened up to the second floor with the sun's rays streaming in from a skylight.
The kitchen was spacious with fresh ingredients in the fridge. Cooking here was not a problem at all.
"My apologies for leaving breakfast's preparation to you because cooking has never been my specialty..."
Shinomiya-sensei revealed her lack of culinary expertise and apologized to those of us who were preparing the meal.
"You've been driving for the whole journey here, Shinomiya-sensei, so leave the rest to us now. Please have a rest."
Tia chimed in energetically after my reply:
"We will make a yummy breakfast! Please wait and look forward to it!"
Due to practicing during the school festival, breakfast was quickly readied through our collective efforts.
Since cooking rice would take time, we prepared simple offerings such as salad, ham, eggs and toast.
"I never thought I'd get to eat the Captain's own cooking..."
John seemed inexplicably touched. Even his eyes were getting moist.
Everyone was at the dining table apart from Mitsuki.
"Then let us begin."
We started breakfast at Lisa's urging.
"...Great, this is pretty good."
Firill chewed her ham and eggs contentedly.
"Yes, it is very delicious. I didn't have the time to visit your Japanese teahouse during the festival despite being your teacher, so I'm glad to taste your cooking now."
Everyone looked at one another happily after hearing Shinomiya-sensei say that.
However, eating in harmony was not the only thing for us to do.
While having breakfast, we first told Lisa's group about what we had experienced and learned.
The battle at the NIFL base, Mitsuki neutralized, dragon marks changing in color—as well as what Vritra had revealed.
Kili smiled wryly after listening to these topics.
"A second-generation dragon will treat all Ds as potential partners. By the third generation, the entire human race will become targets... I never expected a scheme to such an extent, color me impressed, Mother, but—"
Kili praised Vritra while looking at the young girl sitting next to her, then laughed.
"—Bound by a vine right now, how unseemly you look."

"Hmph.. Mine objective is accomplished so long as the antimatter user sleepeth. I care not for the current circumstances."
Vritra made a displeased look and turned her face away. On the other hand, Kili happily brought a piece of jammed toast to Vritra's lips.
"But you can't eat in this state, can you? Just now, Yuu has passed me the job of monitoring you, Mother, so I shall look after you from now on."
"Unneeded, I shall not eat that—"
"Here you go, say ah—"
Ignoring Vritra's refusal, Kili brought the toast closer.
"S-Stop! Do not shove it over! Jam is getting on my face!"
—Kili clearly enjoyed the situation.
I smiled wryly, took my eyes off the squabbling mother and daughter then looked in John's direction.
"Okay, let's listen to John's intel next. You wanted to tell us something about Kraken Zwei, right?"
"Y-Yes! Actually—"
John was originally about to bring a piece of tomato to his mouth. He stopped and started to explain.
What he told us.. was truly shocking.
"—So this means that Kraken Zwei left the lab to chase after you, John?"
Unable to believe immediately, I asked John.
I could not reconcile the young girl who had attacked us with mithril hair and antimatter with the image of her hugging John while crying.
"Yes, no mistake about it. That child yearns for me, almost like... a child yearning for her parents."
However, John remained insistent. Immediately, Ariella crossed her arms before her chest and said:
"So this is probably what they call filial imprinting. Because you are the first person that Kraken Zwei saw after her birth, so it thinks you're its parent..."
"However... John was captured by Kraken Zwei, right? If she thinks you're her parent, why..."
Firill raised a question.
In the middle of playing around with Vritra, Kili sighed deeply at this point.
"That's another hidden story. Seriously... What I did was a complete waste of effort. Very well, hurry and tell them what happened next."
At Kili's urging, John continued:
"The Kraken's child was very obedient. Oh, even though we couldn't understand each other in the beginning, throughout the dialogue process, she gradually started to comprehend what I was saying... She's really smart!"
John looked especially happy while he spoke.
"Stop acting like an idiot parent showing off her child and get to the point."
However, Kili complained about John going on a tangent.

"I-I don't need you to tell me that. Anyway, the Kraken's child settled down after I told her not to cause a commotion. But because of that, Sleipnir found an opening..."
"Sleipnir, you say?"
I could not help but gasp to hear the name of the team that I used to belong to and had served as captain.
"Yes. Sleipnir launched a sudden attack while we were camping in the mountain. Reacting late because she was obeying me, the Kraken's child was open... I sacrificed myself to block the attack for her."
John touched his chest after saying that.
"I definitely suffered a mortal wound at the time. In my fading consciousness, I saw the child in anger—I was already on a bed when I woke up. Kili should know better what happened during that time."
With the subject passed to her, Kili shrugged.
"Let me be clear first, I am only speculating. I think the Kraken's child probably used dark matter to perform biogenic transmutation, thus healing John from the verge of death."
"What...? You're saying that Kraken Zwei can even use biogenic transmutation?"
I asked in surprise.
Since the transmutation of a living creature's physiological structure was too complicated, beyond the processing capacity of the human brain, it was not a realm that ordinary Ds could reach.
Kili and Tia were probably the only ones capable at the moment. Tia might have used Yggdrasil's power since the vine restraining Vritra was undoubtedly biological matter.
"Because I can't think of any other possibility. The Kraken's child must have been moving while protecting the unconscious John. But because I snatched him away by force, she chased desperately..."
Listening to this point, Shinomiya-sensei frowned.
"In other words... Kraken Zwei's objective was not you, who is now seen as a mate, but him, who she treats as a parent?"
"This I don't know. Since she marked me, that means she probably wants me too. Through the dragon mark, I can sense feelings of that type vaguely."
Kili answered while pressing down on her right hand's dragon mark that had turned purple.
"...Reproductive desire is a living creature's basic instinct. 'Tis highly probable that she hath forgotten the likes of familial affection long ago."
After chewing the toast that had been stuffed in her mouth and swallowing it, Vritra smiled smugly and spoke.
"Indeed, considering that our dragon marks are changing in color... She must be prioritizing mates."
Ariella pressed her hand on her abdomen and agreed with Vritra. Instantly, a heavy and silent atmosphere shrouded everyone.

"Wait! It's too early to decide that. Just let me meet that child and confirm with her. Before that, I hope you won't jump to conclusions first. That child is no dragon... She's human."
John stood up with a screech of his chair, insisting in a strong tone of voice.
"—Personally I feel the same. I hope that child... I hope Miyako's daughter is human. However, we cannot release her so simply given how difficult it was to imprison her. Let us add this proposal to one of our countermeasure options when we take action in the future."
Clenching both fists, Shinomiya-sensei announced this approach.
As Shinomiya Miyako's older sister, she wanted to agree with John, but as the commander, she could not act according to private emotions.
"...That is good enough for now, thank you."
Perhaps sensing Shinomiya-sensei's resolve, John lowered his head and bowed, taking his seat again.
"Then Shinomiya-sensei, we will be staying here for the time being while observing the situation, will we?"
Lisa asked a question as though summarizing the conclusion.
"Yes, we will observe for the next few days. If there are no changes, we should be able to return to Midgard. Suppose Kraken Zwei leaves the hole, we will have to find a way to resolve the situation. Otherwise, there will be no future for Ds."
After declaring that, Shinomiya-sensei turned her gaze to me.
"Mononobe Yuu, contact your family first. No matter how the situation unfolds, we probably won't have the luxury of going back. Although you cannot reveal the whole story, you still need to give them a proper explanation and don't let your family worry."
"—Understood."
Seeing me nod, Shinomiya-sensei resumed her meal.
Showing consideration for other people's family, her face looked so gentle from the side.

Part 5

'—Then pass this message to Mitsuki. Tell her to take care.'
"Yes, Mom, I got it."
Ending the call on my portable terminal, I leaned my back against the balcony railing.
From the room I was using on the second floor of the mountain villa, I could overlook the fenced tennis courts. I could also spot another building in the distance. Probably a guest house.
On the court, Iris and Lisa had changed into tennis uniforms available in the mountain villa and were playing tennis.
The others were still tired from the long drive and looked like they were going to rest until noon. Keeping the unusually energetic Iris company was Lisa, who had not taken part in the battle yesterday.
"Lisa-chan, here comes the ball!"
With a large stroke, Iris served a powerful fast ball.
"Not bad at all, Iris-san!"
However, when Iris struck the ball to the other side, Lisa caught up and returned it with splendid form.
—Iris really seemed to be in top shape.
Midgard's courses included ordinary PE class in addition to the training of practical skills. PE classes mostly involved sports in indoor facilities such as tennis, volleyball or basketball.
Not particularly athletic, Iris was always on the losing side, but today, she was playing a spectacular match.
However, after watching them rally for quite a while, I felt my gaze involuntarily drawn to the pale thighs exposed under the miniskirts rather than what was happening in the match. With every strenuous motion, it felt like their underwear could almost be seen.
—She can't have forgotten them today, right?
Since Iris had forgotten to wear underwear in the past, I could not tear my gaze from her despite the worries in my heart.
"Ah... What am I doing?"
I suddenly regained my senses and pressed my palm to my forehead. Now was not the time for such thoughts.
Although there was the Kraken Zwei and Vritra incidents on one hand, I had forgotten something important.
Who I loved the most—I still had not reached a conclusion.

I already thought that "my current self" would disappear once I recovered my memories and returned to "my past self," but reality was not that simple. With two types of memories mixed together, past and present, even I myself had trouble telling which ones were real.
What flashed through my mind was Mitsuki's face, stuck in deep slumber.
But just as I was getting ready for a change of pace, a gust of wind blew Lisa's skirt up. What entered my view was pure white fabric—
Lisa frantically pushed her skirt down and her gaze met mine. During this opening, Iris served an ace then turned her head back to look up at me on the balcony.
"Mononobe! Did you see that just now?"
"Eh, no—"
I thought she was asking about Lisa's underwear, so I answered in a panic.
"Eh, you didn't see it? But I served such a spectacular ace just now..."
"Oh, you mean that? Yeah, I definitely saw that too."
Realizing my mistake, I corrected myself, only to see Iris smile happily.
"Wow, I'm so glad!"
Seeing her expression, my heart skipped a beat, but Lisa glared at me with her face red.
"Mononobe Yuu, by saying you 'definitely saw that too,' what else did you see exactly?"
"W-Well..."
Just as I hesitated how to answer, Iris waved to me.
"Come over here too, Mononobe! Let's play together!"
"I will have you explain yourself clearly. Please come down at once!"
Lisa demanded my presence too, so I sighed and gave up on resisting.
"Got it... Wait for me."
After answering Iris and Lisa, I opened the balcony's French windows and returned to the room.
"C-Captain! Will you be inclined to go play tennis!?"
Sitting on the bed, John seemed extra nervous as he asked me. Far too reserved, his choice of words was also a bit strange.
"Yeah... By the way, why are you so on edge?"
"U-Umm... Because I never expected to share a room with you, Captain..."
I could not help but smile wryly after finding out he was concerned about the room assignments.
"We're the only guys so getting assigned to the same room is only natural, right? There aren't enough rooms to give everyone a single. Although there seems to be another building—considering the emergency situation, it's best that we don't spread ourselves out."
"Y-Yes, that is true..."
"Is there a problem? Haven't we camped together many times during NIFL's operations before?"
I could not figure out why John felt nervous.
"Yes... But this our first time sharing a room, just the two of us—"

Seeing John blush and bow his head in shyness, I sighed deeply.
"We're both guys so you don't have to be that bothered. Besides, we're equals now. Since we're no longer under NIFL, you don't need to use polite speech with me."
"N-No way, because to me, you are someone to be respected, Captain, so I am fine with maintaining the current relationship."
John shook his head and refused.
"You're serious as always... But that's your good point too, John. Still, being tense all the time is not good for your health. How about some tennis for a change of pace?"
"M-Me too?"
"Yeah, let's have a match, John. You'll accept if you're a man, right?"
I deliberately provoked him and John immediately tensed his expression.
"—Yes sir! Of course I will accept, because I am a man!"
Putting extra emphasis on the word "man," he nodded and accepted the challenge.
"Then let's go."
"Affirmative!"
John saluted and answered, then we headed over to the tennis courts where Iris and Lisa were waiting.

After sweating from tennis and having lunch, we then relaxed in the living room—Time passed as though we were out on some kind of staff retreat.
Those of us who were initially unsettled by their dragon marks changing color now seemed a bit calmer.
Firill and Ren were by the window, amply lit by sunlight, engrossed in reading and playing on the computer respectively. Still full of energy, Iris had gone out, saying she was taking a stroll nearby.
Having driven since last night, Shinomiya-sensei was resting in her room.
The others were gathered on the sofa in front of the television, watching a news program. No—on closer examination, Tia was fast asleep, using Lisa's lap as a pillow, probably sleepy after a meal.
'—"Black" Vritra was sighted in the sky above Nanato City yesterday. Furthermore, there have been reports of a flying creature, alleged to be a dragon—'
The news was reporting about Vritra. Kraken Zwei did not get a single mention from any news program, so information control seemed rather tight.
"Oh, look, look. Mother, you're on television. If everyone knew that the gigantic dragon looks this adorable now, they will surely be in for a surprise."
Kili pointed at the black dragon shown on the TV screen and joked with Vritra.
"...Hmph."

Perhaps annoyed with Kili's persistent toying with her, Vritra turned her face away without saying a word.
"Fufu, you're even pouting too. Mother is very cute when she's like that as well. Don't you agree, Yuu?"
Kili leaned herself against me, who was sitting next to her, and sought my agreement. Her soft bosom was touching my arm, forcing me to lose composure.
"H-Hey—"
"Kili! Get away from the Captain!"
"You are too close together!"
Before I could complain, John and Lisa were already chastising Kili.
However, Kili smiled at John and Lisa to taunt them instead of separating from me.
"What? Are you two jealous of me?"
"N-No! It's because the Captain feels troubled that I—"
"Indeed, even if you force him, he will feel nothing more than irritation."
Red in the face, John and Lisa denied resolutely.
Just as both sides were glaring at each other and the atmosphere was growing tense—A patter of hasty footsteps was heard from the entrance.
"Hey! I found a beautiful river nearby! There's a waterfall even though it's a small river and there's so many fish swimming in the water! Do you wanna have a look, everyone?"
Iris was back from her walk outside. Still inexplicably energetic, she invited us to go with a face of excitement.
Glad to free myself from the crossfire, I seized the opportunity to rise from the sofa.
"Great, let's go. Lead the way, Iris."
"Yuu... My goodness."
Kili glared at me unhappily.
"—Since there's fish, rod fishing should be possible. I'm coming too."
Watching television silently this whole time, Ariella stood up, apparently interested.
"I will pass since I'm tired from tennis. Also, I'm currently serving as Tia-san's pillow."
Stroking the sleeping Tia's hair, Lisa declined the invitation.
"I'm not going either. It feels like it'll be a pain to go into the mountains while acting as Mother's nanny."
Kili shrugged and replied. Vritra grumbled "Do not treat me as an infant."
At the window, Firill and Ren waved to see us off.
"What about you, John?"
"Oh—I shall keep you company too!"
John rose up frantically.
"Mononobe, come this way!"
Iris pulled my arm and led the way.

We exited the mountain villa and walked along a path to the forest. Even inside the forest, the path remained well-paved and was very easy to walk.
"We're almost there, Mononobe!"
Just as Iris said, we soon heard the sound of flowing water.
Getting out of the forest, our view broadened as we came to the riverside.
"This is… Rather than a river, it's more like a small stream."
I looked at the flowing water and commented. Upstream, there was a small waterfall roughly ten meters in height.
"The water is really clear and transparent. There's so many fish swimming. Fishing here should be fun."
Ariella cheered as she peered at the water surface.
"Given this level of transparency and shallowness of the water, spearfishing will be faster. Or catching with bare hands."
Having experienced outdoor survival during many missions, John made this suggestion but Ariella shrugged in exasperation.
"You don't get it at all. Can't be helped, I'll teach you the pleasures of rod fishing."
"H-Hey!? I want to go with the Captain—"
Ariella grabbed John's arm firmly and brought her lips to his ear.
"Also, I have things to ask you."
After saying that, Ariella whispered something to him. John's face instantly turned pale.
"W-Why do you..."
"Don't you remember? I fought you back in the Principality of Erlia. After all, many things can be learned just by physical contact."
Ariella giggled and explained. John slumped his shoulders dejectedly.
"Guh... Do as you wish."
"Great, so let's start the lesson with how to make a simple fishing rod. We'll go pick up suitable branches! Mononobe-kun, lend him to me for a bit, okay?"
Hence, Ariella took John and entered the nearby bushes, leaving Iris and me behind, staring at each other.

"What's with them?"
"I don't know either..."
We cocked our heads in puzzlement. Just as the conversation died down, I heard random noises in the forest.
The rustling in the trees, birds calling, the water in the stream, the waterfall—the only one beside me was Iris.
"U-Umm, let's go to the waterfall for a look!"
Iris urged me in a slightly obviously stiff tone of voice. Perhaps she was also conscious of the fact that the two of us were alone.
"S-Sure."
I nodded nervously in response.
Thus, with unnatural footsteps, we headed to the waterfall.
Although the volume of water falling down was low, the view was still impressive up close. Small bubbles of water flew up, shrouding the waterfall's vicinity in a layer of light mist.
"Wow, the water's so cold!"
Iris reached for the waterfall but quickly retracted her hands. Then this time, she peered into the stream and cheered.
"Look, look, there's a crab! It's smaller than the ones on beaches!"
"—That's a river crab. Even though it's small, it's still essentially edible. But you risk getting infected by parasites if you don't cook it with fire."
Iris immediately looked very interested when I told her about outdoor survival knowledge I had learned from NIFL.
"Really? I wonder if it tastes good?"
Glimmering brightly with excitement in her eyes, Iris reached for the river crab in the water.
"Hwah!?"
Almost getting her finger pinched by a crab's pincer, Iris hastily withdrew her finger, but fell over from the momentum.
"Are you okay?"
Smiling wryly, I extended my hand to her.
"T-Thank you..."
Iris reached out shyly but stopped before our fingers were about to touch.
"What's wrong?"
"...Nothing, I'm fine. I can stand up on my own!"
Iris smiled cheerfully and got up by her own effort. She used her handkerchief to wipe off sand stuck to her skirt and took a step away from me.
"Mononobe—I've come to understand. I can't keep relying on your kindness."
"Huh...?"
Staring at Iris' face, I could not understand what she was talking about.
Calm determination surfaced on her face.
"Back when Mitsuki-chan collapsed from Vritra-chan's attack, Mononobe... Your face looked really scary. That expression was like the end of the world

had arrived. I don't want to let you make that kind of look again, Mononobe."
Iris hugged herself and spoke in a trembling voice.
"So from now on... I will try my best not to rely on you, Mononobe. This is to let you focus your heart on Mitsuki only at critical moments."
After saying that, she turned around as though trying to hide her face.
"Iris..."
Despite acting lively and cheerfully, had she been thinking about this the whole time? —When that thought crossed my mind, I could not help but bite my lip.
'Please worry more about Iris-san than me, Nii-san. Because Iris-san is the one you love, Nii-san.'
What Mitsuki had said to me in the NIFL base flashed across my mind.
Both of them wanted me to stop considering and worrying about them, but that sort of thing... How could I possibly do that?
"I think you've probably gotten the wrong idea, Iris. I haven't lost anything as a result of retrieving my memories."
"Eh?"
Iris looked back and I continued.
"I think I was wrong in the beginning too. I thought that my current self would vanish once I recalled my past self, but reality isn't like that. Even after my memories recovered, I'm still me."
Then touching my left chest, I told her:
"My feelings for you have not changed, Iris, they are still here."
"!?"
Iris blushed intensely and pressed her hands forcefully on her chest.
"Don't say that... ever again, Mononobe."
Iris stared at me with a tearful smile.
Seeing tears flow out from the corners of her eyes, I could not help but gasp.
"Back then, had Mitsuki-chan really died, Mononobe, you probably would have broken down. For you to be yourself, Mononobe, you need Mitsuki-chan. Most certainly, the one I love... is the Mononobe who treasures Mitsuki-chan more than anyone!"
After saying these words with a clumsy smile, Iris started going back along the path she had taken to come here.
"...Wait up!"
Catching the hand I had failed to grasp just now, I stopped Iris.
"Let me go, Mononobe. Am I wrong on any point?"
Confronted with her question, I could not find an answer. Had Mitsuki lost her life then and there, I would not have been able to stop. I would have allowed "Fafnir" to control my body and kill Vritra. Then with that, I might not have returned.
Seeing my reaction, Iris smiled wryly.

"If I died, Mononobe, you'd mourn me... But you probably won't break down. I think that's the gap between Mitsuki-chan and me that can never be filled."
Iris wanted to shake my hand off, but I hung on tightly in defiance.
Why? Because it was not like that.
Because that was the one sentence that was wrong.
"I can't imagine what'll happen after you die, Iris. But if anyone tried to take you away or kill you, Iris, I will risk everything to stop it, even at the cost of my life. This is the one assertion I can be certain."
"—"
Iris gasped, her body frozen on the spot.
Our eyes met but Iris was the first to look away.
"Don't say anymore, Mononobe. If you talk like this, I... Urgh—"
Iris' voice trembled, but just as she tried to say something, she suddenly showed a look of pain.
I thought I was gripping too hard so I released her hand, only to see Iris hold the side of her abdomen. That location was Iris' dragon mark.
"Don't tell me—"
I cried out in surprise. Then Ariella and John emerged from the bushes slightly farther away. Both of them were holding long branches for making fishing rods but the atmosphere did not feel as though they were going to start fishing. Ariella's reaction was the same as Iris'—frowning, she had her hand on her lower abdomen, which was exactly the location of her dragon mark.
"...Perhaps Kraken Zwei is starting to move."
When Ariella suggested that with a look of suffering, John clenched her fists as though enduring something.
While Iris was pressing on her dragon mark, I placed my hand on her shoulder and told her quietly.
"What I just said was not a lie."
"Mononobe..."
Iris looked up at me with unease in her eyes.
I knew very well that Iris was not worrying about her own safety. Surely, she was worrying about the matter of me and Mitsuki.
Despite understanding that, I still had no intention of going back on what I had just said.

Chapter 2 - Transformed Awaker

Part 1

Inside a forest on a mountain, there was an unnatural patch of desert.
This was the zone formed by Iris Freyja's Catastrophe. A huge hole had opened up in the center. The mouth of the opening had been blocked using rocks made of mithril.
Sealed under the rocks was the daughter of Shinomiya Miyako whom the "Purple" Kraken had chosen as its mate.
This daughter not only inherited the Kraken's powers but could also control dark matter. A hybrid dragon.
She was named Kraken Zwei.
That monster was supposed to be sealed at the bottom of the hole.
However, a crack appeared on the mithril, theoretically the hardest and most durable substance.
It was an unthinkable phenomenon.
Yet the mithril was definitely splitting apart.
Distributed in the vicinity of the hole, NIFL's unmanned weaponry was observing the scene too.
Furthermore, the unmanned weaponry's sensors also captured silver light and the sound of sharply slicing wind.
It was the trails of Kraken Zwei's hair, also made of mithril just like the rocks.
...As well as the sound of wires swung at frightening speeds.
The silver light and sound of slicing wind continued nonstop. With every instance, the cracks in the mithril increased.
Then cut up into smaller pieces, the mithril rocks collapsed, unable to sustain their shape.
Just as the mithril collapsed in a clatter, a silver ribbon extended broke out of the debris and extended outside.
The ribbon suddenly expanded, pushing aside the obstructing remains of mithril.
Underneath, an eerie purple glow leaked out.
A monster in the shape of a young girl slowly crawled out from the bottom of the deep hole.
Controlling her extended mithril hair like her own limbs, she had her eye focused on the sky—
"——"

Her pink lips quivered as though she were speaking, but her voice was overwhelmed by the sound of falling rocks. No one heard her.
What her eyes were seeking out, no one knew at this time.

Part 2

As soon as Iris, Ariella, John and I returned to the mountain villa, we saw everyone talking to Shinomiya-sensei with stiff countenances.

"—According to reports, Kraken Zwei just escaped from the hole and started moving again."

Shinomiya-sensei informed us of the situation in a grave tone of voice.

"With that, we must take action. But before that, I wish to check the status of your dragon marks. This is because a D's dragon mark must change color completely in order to transform into a mate, as dictated by past precedent."

After hearing Shinomiya-sensei, the sound of whispering instantly spread among the girls. And for some reason, everyone was staring at John and me.

"Y-You would like us to reveal our marks here?"

With her hand on her bottom, Lisa confirmed with the teacher. Although I had no idea where her dragon mark was located, judging from her reaction—

"Ooh... I'm a bit embarrassed."

Blushing red, Ren held her chest.

"I don't want to do it here either..."

With her hand on her lower abdomen, Ariella also averted her gaze.

"I'm perfectly fine with any time and place if it's to show Yuu. That being said, my dragon mark is merely on my right hand."

Saying that, Kili raised her right hand. Her dragon mark had already turned purple completely.

"Tia too... If it's for husband, no problem. But Tia doesn't want another man to see."

Tia pressed on her thigh shyly, fidgeting in awkwardness.

"Captain, I shall excuse myself for a while."

Reading the mood, John temporarily retreated to the corridor.

"Oh, hey! John, me too—"

I hastily tried to leave with him, but became frozen on the spot because Firill started undressing in front of me.

"This is fine now. Although it's embarrassing... I can accept it if it's Mononobe-kun."

Firill opened up her shirt to show me the dragon mark on her shoulder. Her snow-white skin was visible from the gap in her shirt. Seeing this scene, Iris frantically covered my eyes.

"Wawa! Don't look, Mononobe! Go outside together with John!"
"I-I know, you don't need to push me!"
Thus pushing me into the corridor, Iris glared at me with her face red.
"Do not peek no matter what, got that? Oh—I-It's not like I hate being seen by you, Mononobe, okay?"
After saying something incomprehensible, Iris returned to the living room.
"She doesn't hate being seen but she asks me not to peek...?"
Finding an apparent contradiction in Iris' words, I tilted my head in puzzlement, only to see John, who had exited first, standing in the corridor sighing with a slightly appalled expression.
"...I suppose she means that she doesn't mind being seen by you but she doesn't want you to look at others."
"What—"
I felt my face heat up when I heard what John pointed out.
"Captain, you are regarded with abundant affection from everyone. I can clearly tell this much."
John smiled wryly as he spoke. His tone sounded a bit sad.
"No, that's..."
I scratched my head, unsure how to answer.
"Captain... Umm, are you going out with anyone in particular?"
John asked me slightly nervously.
"What, why are you asking that so suddenly—"
"M-My apologies! I have overstepped my bounds in my curiosity."
Seeing my flustered reaction, John bowed his head and apologized.
"Oh, no... There's nothing you need to apologize for. It's a very normal question seeing as I'm the only guy in group of girls."
I smiled wryly and decided to answer honestly.
"I'm not going out with anyone, because right now...the situation is very complicated."
Iris and Mitsuki were keeping their distance from me, trying to yield to each other. On the other hand, troubled by my gradually recovering memories, I had trouble confirming my own feelings.
"I-I see. Indeed, the situation is definitely chaotic and we must decide how to handle that child..."
Exhaling lightly, John nodded with a solemn look on his face. John looked like he had misinterpreted what I meant but clearing up the misunderstanding might make things worse, so I simply followed his line of conversation.
"—John, you intend to persuade Kraken Zwei?"
"Yes, that child is surely... seeking me out."
John replied, full of certainty.
"I think that's the best way if we can resolve things without fighting. Shinomiya-sensei definitely feels the same way, so you don't need to look so troubled."
I placed my hand on John's head.

"C-Captain..."
John went red as though in embarrassment.
At this moment, the living door opened with a click and Iris poked her head out.
"It's okay now. Only your dragon mark remains to be checked, Mononobe."
"Okay, got it."
I nodded in response and returned to the living room together with John then showed Shinomiya-sensei the dragon mark on my left hand.
"...No change in Mononobe Yuu's dragon mark. It's unclear whether it's because you are a man, or the change simply has yet to appear—Either way, it's a good thing."
"How is everyone's dragon mark?"
A bitter expression surfaced on Shinomiya-sensei's face when she heard my question.
"Kili Surtr Muspelheim's has changed color completely. Ariella Lu and Ren Miyazawa's are at roughly 30%. I have confirmed Mononobe Mitsuki's dragon mark beforehand, hers is in the same state. Lisa Highwalker, Firill Crest and Tia Lightning's dragon marks are also confirmed to have changed color slightly."
"Even Lisa and others..."
Things were happening as Vritra described. She had made the prediction that all Ds would get targeted sooner or later.
"Perhaps the rate of color change in the dragon mark is related to distance. Midgard's Ds have not shown any symptoms, but I fear that's only a matter of time."
"I see... Huh? Speaking of which, I didn't hear Iris mentioned just now?"
I turned my gaze to Iris and asked.
"Iris Freyja's situation is a bit special."
Shinomiya-sensei replied gravely.
"What... does that mean?"
I could feel my face going pale. I took a step towards Shinomiya-sensei and demanded an explanation.
"Calm down, Mononobe Yuu, I don't mean that in a bad way. When Iris Freyja's dragon mark initially showed a change in color, it was the same as Mononobe Mitsuki and the others, but for some reason, her dragon mark has shown almost no further change."
"No further change... in the dragon mark's color?"
I asked Iris with my gaze if it was true.
"Yes, although I dunno why... I checked and discovered that there hasn't been much change."
Holding her left flank, the location of her dragon mark, Iris tilted her head, finding it quite unbelievable.
"—Haha."
Immediately, I heard light laughter. I looked back to see Vritra's shoulders shaking in laughter as though she found things very funny.

"What are you laughing about?"
I frowned and asked her. She responded with a wry smile.
"Hoo—No, it simply crossed my mind that all such happenings hath exceeded mine estimations. I recall that she is the one who inherited Basilisk's authority, yes?"
"Authority...? It's true that Iris can use Basilisk's Catastrophe... But so what?"
I urged her to continue.
"Then what happened is perfectly possible too. Although exceeding mine estimations... No matter, from mine outlook, it mattereth not which outcome."
"What's going on? Vritra, do you know something?"
I glared at Vritra and questioned her, only to see the corners of her lips curl up.
"I do not know but 'tis possible for me to hazard a guess. Be that as it may, I have no obligation to tell thee."
"Tsk..."
Vritra simply gave a mysterious answer then kept silent from then on.
I did not know if she enjoyed sowing uncertainty or if she actually knew something... I could not tell.
"Mother, stop being so mean. Tell them, okay? If you don't speak... I'll be mean to you too, got that?"
Kili giggled and threatened the restrained Vritra.
"Hmph, do as thou wishest, it mattereth not no matter what sort of treatment—H-Hey! Stop stretching my mouth!"
Vritra's cheeks were being pulled left and right. Her body shook as she struggled.
"Oh my, it doesn't matter what kind of treatment, right? Fufu, what soft cheeks. I can't believe your cute little cheeks can stretch this much, Mother."
Nitpicking Vritra's words, Kili began to toy with her.
"I-I ordered thee to stop! Q-Quit pulling!"
Just as I was distracted by their interactions, Shinomiya-sensei coughed to bring my attention back.
"—Relying on Vritra's information would be a waste of time. I will continue."
"Y-Yes!"
Iris straightened her back and nodded in upright posture. Although Kili continued to horse around with Vritra, the others shifted their gaze back to Shinomiya-sensei.
"Regarding our approach against Kraken Zwei, I have decided to attempt persuasion first."
"..."
John gasped, his expression relaxing somewhat. Had Shinomiya-sensei announced extermination as a priority, John would probably have rushed out, even if alone by himself.

"John Hortensia, consequently, I will request your assistance. Is that okay?"
"Yes, certainly! Thank you!"
John nodded and agreed to the request for assistance.
"Kraken Zwei is currently moving towards our position. We will use this fact to lure her to a suitable battlefield and make contact with her there. John Hortensia and Mononobe Yuu will be responsible for making contact with her. With the addition of myself, that makes a total of three of us."
"You're going too, Shinomiya-sensei?"
Since my dragon mark had not changed in color, getting selected was within my expectations, but I had not anticipated Shinomiya-sensei, the commander, to accompany us.
"Yes, I am Miyako's elder sister. Perhaps Kraken Zwei might react to me, a blood relative."
She probably wanted to increase persuasion's chances of success, even if just a little bit. I could sense agonizing in Shinomiya-sensei's expression and voice.
"Understood. In other words, Shinomiya-sensei and John will persuade while I guard the two of you."
"Precisely. If necessary, your antigravitational matter will also help in securing time for retreating."
Shinomiya-sensei spoke stiffly. Using a repulsion bullet will definitely allow us to survive a direct attack from antimatter, but—
"By 'if necessary'... that means if persuasion fails and the situation develops into a battle... Then how should we handle Kraken Zwei?"
If possible, I did not want to consider this situation, but I had no choice but to confirm.
"By that juncture, we will have no choice but to defeat her. If she has lost her rationality to become a dragon in search of mates, then Kraken Zwei would be an enemy that must be defeated."
John's expression froze after listening to Shinomiya-sensei but he did not object, because if persuasion failed, that would mean "the child" mentioned by John no longer existed.
"The job of attacking Kraken Zwei shall be undertaken by Lisa Highwalker, Firill Crest, Tia Lightning and Iris Freyja, the four of you whose dragon marks still have some time before the color change is completed. But even so, the risk of dragonification still exists, so launch your attacks from as far away as possible. The rest of you will stay on standby at this base of operations and take action with your own safety as the top priority."
After listening to Shinomiya-sensei's battle plan, Lisa raised her hand with an expression of doubt.
"Shinomiya-sensei, I understand the stages of the operation, but do we have any actual means of taking down Kraken Zwei? Our choice to trap her earlier stemmed precisely from the fact that we had no way to defeat her without Mitsuki-san..."

"I know, but looking at battle records from earlier, I have concluded that there are openings to attack. I will explain the details later. Time to set off is one hour from now. All participants, please get ready as quickly as possible. I will inform Midgard of the detailed situation via a secret line, so come find me at the caretaker's room if any matters arise."
"Yes—"
Lisa nodded with uncertainty remaining in her expression. The rest of us also nodded to obey Shinomiya-sensei's directions.
"I would've like to have a longer stay..."
Dismissed for now, Iris commented wistfully.
"Tia wanted to play tennis too!"
Having slept almost the entire time apart from lunch, Tia expressed her regret.
"We can come back soon if persuasion succeeds. But if it fails... Then it might turn into a difficult battle."
Lisa seemed to be worrying about the case of fighting Kraken Zwei. Her response to Iris and Tia was stiff in tone.
"Indeed... Not being able to rely on Mitsuki makes a huge difference."
Firill agreed with a worried look.
"If only we could take part too... Sorry."
Ordered to standby, Ariella apologized to us with regret. Next, Ren tugged my clothing from the side.
"...Because I can't go along, I will prepare packed meals for Onii-chan and the others."
Saying that, Ren ran to the kitchen.
Ren had practiced with the rest of the class during the school festival and was now able to do simple cooking. I felt really happy that Ren was offering to cook for us on her own initiative.
"Packed meals huh... It's true that there are leftovers from lunch and there should be enough time with an hour remaining. I'll help out too."
Ariella waved and left with Ren.
"—I won't be helping since I need to supervise Mother."
Kili sat down on the sofa in the living room, speaking while she rubbed Vritra's head.
"That's simply because you can't cook. I've never seen you cook even once when we were working together."
Kili smiled stiffly in response to John's accusation.
"That is quite rude of you. It's merely cooking. I can do it too, but I don't because there's simply no need."
"...Hmph, who knows if you're lying."
"Could you be a little more aware of your position? I almost died to save you."
"I don't remember asking you to save me."
Kili and John glared at each other viciously.

They did not seem to get along despite clearly working together previously. Seeing their interactions, Vritra sighed in exasperation.
"—Now that 'tis mentioned, I cannot believe ye would still engage in the troublesome likes of cooking. If these bonds of mine were to be released, I could effortlessly transmute food for the lot of ye."
Vritra shook her head in annoyance to escape Kili's hand then suggested. However, I smiled wryly and shrugged.
"How can we possibly let you run free? Besides, even if you create food using transmutation, the food will surely be inferior to the real thing like last time. This is the obvious outcome."
When taking a stroll in town, the ice cream that Vritra replicated did not taste good. Even Vritra herself had admitted that.
"Hmph... How arrogant."
Vritra spoke with displeasure and turned her head away.
"Jeez, Mononobe, don't make her sound so bad when she even offered to help. Vritra-chan, don't sulk. I'm very happy for your gesture!"
"I am assuredly not sulking!"
Iris defended her but caused Vritra to sulk even more and yell. Seeing their interactions, Kili could not help but laugh while covering her own mouth.
Leaving the displeased Vritra, we exited the living room, went up to the second floor and returned to our respective rooms.
Rooming with me, John still seemed a bit nervous. He sat down on his bed.
"Although it's time to get ready... There is nothing to do because I have no belongings. I think my weapons were lost during the fight against Sleipnir, so I am completely unarmed right now."
John made a wry smile and showed the empty holster under his jacket.
"Then I'll make one for you using transmutation. What kind of weapon do you want?"
I used to be the team's arsenal as well during my NIFL days. Due to my low capacity for dark matter generation, I could not transmute more than ten kilograms unaided. However, as long as I had stamina, I was able to transmute guns and ammunition below ten kilograms. Hence, there was no worry of exhausting ammunition or losing weapons as long as I was around.
"N-No thank you, umm... It will be fine, because I don't want to trouble you, Captain. Besides, I am not going there to fight."
What John meant was that he was purely going to persuade Kraken Zwei. His expression showed his determination to convince Kraken Zwei no matter what.
"I see, but you should still be minimally prepared since we don't know what'll happen. At least take this with you."
Anti-personnel weapon—AT Nergal.
Using data downloaded to my mind as a blueprint, I created an anti-personnel projectile-based electroshock gun.
"...Yes, understood. Thank you, Captain."

Despite showing slight hesitation, John still received Nergal from my hand and placed it into his holster.
I nodded then sat down in front of my luggage to begin my own preparations.
However, there was not much I needed to do. Unneeded belongings could be left at this base of operations, so there was nothing I needed to do after checking equipment such as my communicator and portable terminal.
"I'm going to check up on Mitsuki, John."
After equipping the necessary items on my person, I stood up and said to John.
"Y-Yes, that is... your sister, right?"
John was sitting on the bed, watching my movements. For some reason, he shifted his gaze away frantically then answered me.
"Yes—She is my precious little sister."
I nodded in response then went to the second room next door. This was Shinomiya-sensei and Mitsuki's room but right now, Mitsuki was alone, sleeping on the bed. Shinomiya-sensei was probably in the caretaker's room, holding a discussion with Midgard.
I entered the room quietly and approached Mitsuki who was lying on the bed under a blanket. Her breaths were long while her skin looked pale. I tried to touch her face lightly and found it even colder than I imagined.
"Mitsuki..."
I gently picked up Mitsuki's upper body in my arms and lifted her hair in the back. The dragon mark on her pale neck came into view. Roughly one third of it had turned purple.
It was evidence that a dragon desired Mitsuki.
Kraken Zwei—She was about to take Mitsuki away from me.
Instantly, my heart began to beat violently. Scorching and aggressive feelings surged in my chest.
—I won't hand Mitsuki over to you.
Just from looking at her face like this, my memories with Mitsuki were reawakened bit by bit.
Her smiling face, her angry face, her happy face... Mitsuki's many faces remained in my heart.
Most poignant of all was her crying face the day when Mitsuki became my sister.
The death of her parents, the manifestation of the power to generate dark matter, adoption by the Mononobe family—Faced with so many changes, Mitsuki had felt greatly troubled and was on the verge of a mental breakdown.
Back then, I had decided. From now on, I shall protect Mitsuki.
Hence, when confronting Hekatonkheir, I did not hesitate and accepted Yggdrasil's deal.
If it was for Mitsuki's sake, whatever it took, I would—
"..."

I suddenly came back to my senses and laid Mitsuki down gingerly.
"...I am getting too emotional. Persuasion should come first, not battle."

I muttered as though warning myself then covered Mitsuki with the blanket up to her shoulders.
If persuasion could resolve the incident, that would be for the best.
However… I somehow got the feeling that the gradual color change in the dragon marks was Kraken Zwei's expressed will.
"No matter what, I will end everything before you wake up, Mitsuki. Wait for me."
I expressed my determination to the sleeping Mitsuki then walked to the room's exit. However—
Riiiiiiiiiiing!!
A loud bell suddenly sounded.
"What happened—?"
I halted and looked around. A bad premonition began to rise within me as though coming from underfoot.
'You are the one making the choice.'
The message Miyazawa Kenya had passed along from Major Loki now echoed in my ear.
"…!"
Thinking something must have happened, I quickly left Mitsuki's room. Immediately, John poked his head out of my room almost simultaneously.
"Captain, what on earth—"
John looked quite disturbed but before I could speak, the indoor announcement system was heard.
'Emergency situation, everyone is to gather at the caretaker's room on the ground floor at once. I repeat, everyone is to gather at the caretaker's room on the ground floor—'
Shinomiya-sensei's voice was calling for us to assemble.
"What happened…?"
John frowned and asked.
"We'll know once we get there. Anyway, let's hurry."
I hurried John and prepared to head to the caretaker's room, but as though trying to block our way, all the other room's doors happened to open at the same time.
"Wawa, Mononobe!"
Rushing out suddenly, Iris almost crashed into me, accidentally stumbling.
"Woah!"
Seeing Iris about to fall over backwards, I grabbed her arm and pulled her back. She immediately blushed.
"T-Thank you."
Iris thanked me then left. Our conversation next to the waterfall was probably still bothering her.
Originally in their rooms to prepare, Lisa, Firill and Tia also showed up after Iris.
"Emergency situation… What could it be?"
"Tia jumped in fright at the sudden announcement!"

Firill and Tia seemed quite unsettled, not knowing what was happening.
"Everyone, please do not stop moving. Let us go to Shinomiya-sensei."
At Lisa's urging, we started walking again and went down a floor. Kili and Vritra were no longer in the living room. The kitchen side also sounded very quiet.
We entered the caretaker's room on the first floor to see that Ariella, Ren, Kili and Vritra had already gathered inside.
The room also served as a security room with many surveillance monitors set up. Shinomiya-sensei was standing in front of the monitors with a solemn expression.
"—Everyone is assembled, right? I will immediately explain the situation. The surveillance devices installed in the mountain has detected multiple intruders. The bell earlier was an alarm to alert us of this fact."
Everyone gasped in response to Shinomiya-sensei's announcement, but rather than surprise, our expressions read more like feelings of "just as expected." They had probably considered this possibility when the bell rang.
"...Is it NIFL?"
Looking at the surveillance monitors, Lisa asked.
"Chances are likely if the information from Director Miyazawa is correct. Sensors at the foot of the mountain were triggered, which means they will take some time to reach here. Before that happens, we must decide how to respond."
Shinomiya-sensei nodded and swept her gaze across everyone's face.
"Meaning that... we either retreat or intercept them."
Ariella murmured with a troubled expression.
"There is an emergency escape passage because this place was designed as a hiding place for important people. Escaping itself is easy but in that event, we will need to carry out our operation while under attack from assailants."
After explaining the situation, Shinomiya-sensei looked at me questioningly. Perhaps she wanted my opinion as a former member of NIFL.
"I believe—we should intercept."
After some slight thought, I expressed my view.
"The risk is too great if we carry out our operation while being hunted as you said, Shinomiya-sensei. And the principal is currently restraining NIFL, so the amount of personnel they can field in secret should be limited. The probability of an endless stream of assassins is very low."
And the most important reason was—As long as the attackers were crushed here, then there would be less danger for Mitsuki and the others who were staying back on standby during the operation.
Since I was going along to persuade Kraken Zwei, that meant I could not stay by Mitsuki's side. Precisely because of that, we must not let the enemy go.
"—I understand your view. However, the enemy should number more than ten, judging from the quantity indicated by the detectors. Is interception actually feasible?"

Shinomiya-sensei asked me with a solemn expression on her face.
I suddenly remembered being asked a similar question in the past.
NIFL had sent a team to invade Midgard and execute Iris who had been marked by Leviathan. At the time, I repelled them single-handedly. Hence, this time too—
"Yes. As long as the enemy is human, I alone will be enough."
I spoke the simple truth.
That was how certain I felt.
I had defeated Hreidmar at the Principality of Erlia. Yesterday, I even came close to killing Vritra.
I definitely would not lose to anyone as long as I was not afraid to kill—And I had already resolved myself for that. Back when I found out that Mitsuki, whom I thought had died, was still alive, I already decided—
—I decided I will never allow anyone or anything precious of mine to be taken away.
"You will fight... alone?"
Shinomiya-sensei gulped and confirmed with me. Everyone stared at me, seemingly intimidated by my intensity.
"The rest of you only need to surround this mountain villa with a wind barrier to cut off enemy invasion. I'll handle the rest."
In a relaxed tone, I told everyone what they should do.
"Hold on, Captain! I wish to fight with you. I will not burden you!"
However, John pulled himself together and frantically begged me.
"...You have a point. Indeed, it should be fine if it's you, John. However, you should take on your original role as a sniper and focus on support in the back."
"Understood! I am honored to be able to fight alongside you again, Captain!"
John saluted me with joy in his eyes.
"I will participate if this is what we're doing, because I need to blow off some steam. Oh by the way, Tia, I leave Mother in your care while I'm gone."
Kili tossed her hair and stepped forward.
"G-Got it."
Tia nodded even though she felt surprised but I could not accept her suggestion so easily.
"No, considering the enemy's goal, since your dragon mark has changed color, Kili—"
"I'll make myself clear first. It's useless even if you object. I will act on my own."
Kili interrupted me and insisted strongly.
"—Fine. But can I ask you not to use attacks that'll get us caught up in them?"

I sighed and reluctantly agreed to let Kili join the battle. She was definitely sufficient in terms of combat power, but entrusting my back to her made me feel a bit uneasy.
"Of course, you don't have to worry, Yuu."
Kili smiled mischievously. Seeing this, Lisa spoke up.
"Unfortunately, I cannot relax. Hence, I shall accompany Kili-san to fulfill surveillance and bodyguard roles."
Hearing her suggestion, I panicked.
"W-Wait! Lisa, you can't go!"
"Why is that?"
"You don't have any experience in fighting humans, right? Once it turns into a war..."
—You might taint your hands.
I made myself vague because we were in front of everyone, but Lisa seemed to pick up what I wanted to say.
She nodded with an expression of comprehension then looked me squarely in both eyes.
"In truth—I have been secretly training in techniques against humans ever since my defeat at Kili-san's hands. I shan't approach the frontlines at all, so please allow me to assist."
"Lisa..."
Sensing her unrelenting determination, I swallowed what I was going to say.
"Ever since Mitsuki-san collapsed, you have been brooding the whole time. I really cannot leave you alone."
Lisa smiled wryly and touched my cheek. Only then did I realize my face had been tense all along.
"...You mustn't push yourself too far, okay?"
Through our "couples training" previously, I understood Lisa's personality very well. By this point, rather than push her away, it would be better to trust and rely on her.
"Exactly what I wanted to say to you."
Lisa nodded in agreement with a mixture of relief and joy in her expression.
"...Ahem."
But at this moment, Firill coughed deliberately, bringing Lisa to her senses. Frantically, she withdrew her hand from my cheek.
"U-Umm..."
Listening to our conversation, Iris raised her hand, looking like she had something to say.
"Let me say this first. I absolutely won't allow you to fight, Iris. Whether mithril explosions or Catastrophe, your firepower is too high against humans."
"I haven't said anything yet..."
Iris' shoulders slumped in dejection.

"It's the same for the others. Firill and Ariella, please focus on deploying the barrier. Tia and Ren will monitor Vritra. Iris, I am counting on you to look after Mitsuki."

I looked at everyone in turn and told them their respective responsibilities.

Vritra looked displeased to be treated as a surveillance target, but everyone else nodded affirmatively with serious expressions.

Next, I shifted my gaze back to Shinomiya-sensei at last.

"Mononobe Yuu, I will believe in you and hand command over to you. Those heading out to intercept, please put on communicators and stay in frequent contact."

"Yes ma'am!"

We answered Shinomiya-sensei and prepared to intercept the intruders.

Part 3

"—Firill and Ariella will create a barrier of air, the standard type used in counter-dragon combat. Since infantry should not have enough combat strength to break through easily, my plan is to deliberately lure the intruders to the mountain villa's surroundings where visibility is favorable, then defeat them one after another."
In front of the villa, I told the battle plan to John, Kili and Lisa, the members of the interception team.
Firill and Ariella, in charge of deploying the barrier of air, were also listening to me behind John and the others.
"John, Kili and Lisa, please stay next to the barrier and cover me with long-range shots. Hitting not required, restraining shots are good enough. If the enemy approaches, you should retreat temporarily into the barrier, or Firill and Ariella could expand the barrier in response."
"Affirmative."
John instantly responded while Lisa and the rest nodded in agreement. Only Kili stared at me defiantly.
"Defense is not a problem once I deploy Muspelheim. I'd like to go on the frontlines too and let loose."
"Denied. I know how strong you are, Kili, but this time, please place your own safety as the number one priority."
I looked into her eyes and persuaded her forcefully. After making a slightly surprised look, Kili smiled.
"What a new feeling, to know that someone is caring for me. Still... I suppose fighting while I watch your back might not be bad after all."
Kili nodded and took a step back.
"Okay, everyone—The operation begins. We will talk via the communicators from this point onwards."
I pointed at the communicator on my ear and finished speaking, then moved out.
I made my way towards the position where Shinomiya-sensei had confirmed a reaction in the detectors. Instead of taking the road for vehicles like the one we traveled on, the enemy was approaching the villa through the mountain.
In that case, they should be arriving from the direction of the forest with the stream where Iris had taken us earlier.

Walking on a path sandwiched between flowerbeds featuring vivid colors, I stopped at the midpoint between the forest and the villa.
Straying too far from the villa would prevent me from responding if an emergency came up. I looked back to see the figures of Kili's group clearly.
Firill and Ariella were standing on the villa's roof with their fictional armaments wielded, deploying a wind barrier. Kili and Lisa's position was the same as just now. On the other hand, John was holding the anti-materiel rifle—AT Ishtar—which I had transmuted before the operation. Staying on the roof of the storehouse next to the villa, he had entered sniping posture.
'Captain, no approaching target sighted so far.'
I heard John's voice over the communicator. John's excellent *eyes* meant that his word was more reliable than any radar.
Deciding there was still time before the enemy attacked, I slowly awakened the "Fafnir" residing within me.
This was a certain existence rooted deeply in my heart, whose purpose was murder.
Impossible to describe using words such as technique or mindset—An unknown monster.
My mind grew calm and undisturbed, gradually cooling down.
I sensed Fafnir awaken from the bottom of my consciousness, gradually melding with me.
I naturally switched over. This was an unprecedented feeling.
Until recently, I had avoided Fafnir's total control as much as possible, because it was as though I was gradually invaded by something unidentified—It was extremely terrifying.
However, during my battle against Hreidmar, Fafnir's prototype, at the Principality of Erlia, I had committed myself to kill without hesitation for the sake of protecting Firill.
Then during the battle against Vritra the previous day, I had probably crossed the line.
Thinking Mitsuki had been fatally wounded by Vritra, with anger, hatred and despair stirring in my heart, for the first time in my life, I embraced emotions wanting to kill. I embraced true killing intent.
Surely that was the kind of killing intent that had caused the boundary between Fafnir and me to become ambiguous.
Thanks to Iris stopping me, I did not kill Vritra... But I could not forget the murderous impulse that had sprung at one point.
Now was the same. As soon as I thought about someone wanting to harm Mitsuki, Iris and the others, a flood of dark emotions would surge from the bottom of my heart.
My own killing intent had sharpened Fafnir's fangs.
—They're coming.
My sharpened senses captured minute presences.
There was an intense aura of bone-chilling killing intent.
'Captain—five enemies at 1 o'clock, six enemies at 11 o'clock, but...'

Almost at the same time, John's report came, but his voice was mixed with shock.
I instantly understood why.
Silver luster could be glimpsed faintly in the forest. Soldiers in full-body armor emerged, passing through the lush greenery.
They were dressed the same way as Hreidmar whom I had fought last time.
'Hreidmar...! Why—'
"—Don't panic, John. They're just wearing the same armored outfit, that's all."
Normally, I would feel a little disconcerted but with Fafnir mixed into me right now, the scene entering my eyes was nothing more than pure information.
They could not all be Hreidmar. Even if the real Hreidmar was among them, he was an opponent I had defeated once in the past and would not affect this upcoming "hunt."
Fictional armament—Siegfried.
Holding the fictional armament I had generated in the shape of an ornamental gun, I dashed towards the enemy. The eleven armored soldiers did not hide at all. Lining themselves side by side in straight line, they attacked me. Although I did not see any weapon resembling heavy firearms, as a team sent to kill Ds, they probably had weapons hidden in their armor. Since it was unknown how they were going to attack, letting them approach Lisa's group in the back would be very dangerous.
I pointed Siegfried's muzzle ahead and concentrated—
"—Gravity Zero."
I shot a bullet of dark matter, transmuting it into antigravitational matter.
The armored soldiers took evasive action, fleeing from the line of fire, but the expanding white light enveloped them and caused their bodies to float up.
What caught them was a zero gravity zone generated from low-density antigravitational matter.
The floating armored soldiers struggled awkwardly in the air but three of them had escaped Gravity Zero's effective range and were charging at me.
The zero gravity zone could not be sustained for long. Before the eight captured enemies regained their freedom, I had to take care of these three first.
I showed no mercy, because these guys wanted to kill Iris and the others... They wanted to kill Mitsuki.
"Plasma Bullet."
I used all the remaining dark matter in my fictional armament to generate a super high-pressure bullet of air. The plasmafied bullet glowed and ripped through the air.
—The armored soldier running in the lead had his arm blown off.
The plasma bullet had pierced the armored soldier's shoulder. Despite losing an arm, the soldier did not stop running, gradually closing in on me.

What...?
I felt a strong sense of dissonance. Not because the armored soldier failed to collapse, but because I could not sense any killing intent from them.
Just now in the forest, they had clearly exuded such intense killing intent—
Speaking of which, I had shot to kill in firing the plasma bullet. My aim could not possibly be off now that I was closer to Fafnir than ever before.
But that question was swiftly answered.
I heard a thunderous boom from behind.
While the soldier with the missing arm was running, his head exploded with scattering fragments with an acute sound.
—A sniper's shot from John.
However, what scattered was not blood and brains but silver mechanical parts. Having lost his head, the soldier fell to the ground, unable to maintain balance. From the neck's cross section pointed towards me, I could see thick wires and complicated machinery.
"These guys are not human. They're humanoid drones!"
I yelled to everyone over the communicator.
Since they were not human, it was no wonder that Fafnir's instincts were dulled.
'In other words—There is no need to show mercy!'
As I heard Lisa's voice, a yellow flash of light immediately flew past me.
An approaching armored soldier was penetrated and exploded. Then came Kili's warning.
'Move aside, Yuu. You'll get hit if you stand there.'
"!?"
Just as I jumped right to evade, a red heat beam shot out, vaporizing the remaining armored soldier.
While escaping from the blistering heat, I looked ahead.
Gravity Zero's effects had ended. Falling on the ground, the eight armored soldiers were standing up again.
I could not sense anything human-like from them. However, suffocating killing intent was still coming from the forest.
"—It looks like all the enemies are unmanned drones, but... There is a person's presence in the forest, most likely the enemy's commander. I'll go defeat him, so please annihilate the drones."
I issued orders to everyone through my communicator.
Since the opponents were not human, it would be simpler and cleaner to leave them to Lisa and Kili with their greater firepower.
However, instinct and intuition warned me... I absolutely must not allow the one in the forest to approach the girls.
'Understood, leave them to us. Compared to dragons, opponents of this sort —are nothing at all.'
I heard Lisa's reliable answer. The others also responded to me.
Hence, I stepped over the broken armored soldiers and ran to the forest.
Freed from the zero gravity space, some armored soldiers tried to intercept

me but cover fire from Lisa and the others stopped them from approaching me.
The surroundings grew dim after I entered the forest. The killing intent felt even more intense.
Among the armored soldiers earlier—Hreidmar was not among them. But in that case, he might be up ahead.
I generated Siegfried again and cautiously advanced towards the stream.
'...Can you hear me, Captain? Please respond on a different channel.'
I heard John's voice over the communicator.
"What is it?"
I switched channels and asked. Hesitantly, John said:
'Since the enemy might be Hreidmar... There are things I have to tell you now.'
I heard him gulp over the communicator then a somber voice shook my eardrum.
'At the Principality of Erlia... I saw the contents inside Hreidmar.'
"—Contents?"
I recalled what had happened when I defeated Hreidmar.
It was a fight to protect Firill. Back then, I realized I could not win unless I was prepared to kill, so I fired a penetrating shot at Hreidmar's armored outfit from point blank range with an anti-materiel rifle. But in the next instant, white smoke obscured my vision... By the time the smoke dissipated, there was nothing left in the armor.
'No, more precisely, I should say I did not see it... Because no one had escaped from the armor at all...'
"What the heck?"
John's explanation was incoherent, causing me to frown. During this time, I stayed vigilant of my surroundings.
Walking towards where the killing intent was more concentrated, I heard the waterfall.
'White smoke—that was all the armored outfit contained. At least based on what I saw.'
"Only smoke...?"
How could that be? These words reached my throat, but I swallowed them. Because I knew very well how excellent John's vision was. At the very least, he could not have missed anything or made a mistake.
However, after fighting him directly, I could say with conviction: The Hreidmar that time was human. Lurking in my heart, Fafnir had regarded him as prey—regarded him as human.
'It's surely something shady... So to confirm Hreidmar's true identity, I deserted NIFL and worked with Kili.'
I arrived at the stream's bank. Blocked by obstacles, sunlight formed shadows at my feet. The waterfall sounded clearer.
'But the result was I still have not been able to find out his true identity. Nevertheless, after searching NIFL's bases, I have obtained two pieces of

information that should be quite important. First of all, Captain, the man you fought at the Erlia had an official designation as Hreidmar 05. This number has already been erased.'
I stopped but not as a reaction to what John had said.
Standing next to the waterfall whose modest flow fell down a protruding cliff was an soldier in silver armor.
His appearance was like the other enemies but the inside was clearly different. Almost suffocating... Viscous killing intent was giving me goosebumps.
'Then the other piece of information—which you could probably guess from the numbering of 05... I have discovered that *there are multiple beings bearing the code name of Hreidmar*.'
The armored soldier gave off killing intent that could not possibly come from machinery. He kicked the ground.
The fierce step caused sand on the bank to fly. He was holding two knives of different lengths and shapes, one in each hand.
Fast—But this speed was known to me.
"Red Bullet."
Using the dark matter in my fictional armament, I transmuted a blade of air. Compressed to high density, the blade glowed red-hot at its tip, instantly tracing out a red trajectory in the air.
The armored soldier charged with astounding momentum, swinging the two knives.
This was precisely the way Hreidmar moved. The strongest killer—whom my past self used to admire.
The speeding flash of silver was approaching to extinguish my life. I tilted my body slightly, dodging the right hand's knife by a hair's breadth.
The arm, covered in silver armor, brushed past my cheek, knocking away the communicator on my ear.
Cast out of my awareness for the time being, John's talking was interrupted as a result. The sound of slicing wind shook my eardrum.
The other knife went for my throat without a moment's delay. I used the scorching blade of air to engage the approaching flash of silver.
Clang—A dull impact sounded while the high-temperature blade sank into the knife.
"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!!"
I roared and pushed the blade, swinging it horizontally.
Immediately, the blade severed the knife, carving a red slash on the enemy's chest armor.
With this—It was over.
I took a step forward and made a fatal thrust with the red blade. Although the armored soldier swung his other knife, he was too slow.
Merely a tiny gap—but it was a decisive gap. Regardless of whether this guy was the true Hreidmar or someone else, they were no longer a match for me.

So long as I fought while prepared to kill, they would be nothing more than Fafnir's prey.
I targeted the cracked part of the chest armor and stabbed the red blade, receiving a clear sensation as feedback, the feeling of penetrating a vital.
The crack began to spread from where the blade was embedded.
"—!"
Feeling a bad premonition, I instantly took a leap back. Immediately, the chest armor blew apart from inside with an intense gust of white smoke.
I covered my mouth and nose, keeping my distance to avoid breathing in the smoke. This situation was the same as when I defeated Hreidmar in Erlia last time.
'White smoke—that was all the armored outfit contained.'
John's earlier words flashed in my mind.
A light breeze dispersed the smoke... The armored soldier remained lying face up on the ground with a large hole blown out of the chest from within, exposing the hollow interior.
Empty—Truly nothing inside. There were no signs of someone escaping either.
Due to the lack of human prey, Fafnir gradually sank into the depths of my consciousness. The more I recovered my normal senses, the more troubled I felt.
"What is going on...?"
I frowned and cautiously approached the broken armor.
'Hreidmar is no longer a match for you, huh? Your growth truly fills me with joy.'
"What..."
I suddenly heard a familiar voice from the armor.
'Can you hear my voice, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe? I hope the speaker isn't damaged.'
"Major... Loki..."
Troubled, I voiced that name. It seemed like he was talking to me through a speaker somewhere installed in the armor.
'Oh...? Why are you looking so dazed? You've defeated Hreidmar again to prove that you're the strongest. You could show more pride, you know?'
Major Loki seemed to be able to view the situation here as well. I had no idea where the camera was installed, but I shifted my gaze to the armored outfit's head.
"This armored soldier... Did you remote control it, Major Loki?"
I could not think any other reason why there was nobody inside so I asked Major Loki, but was greeted with laughter as though he found it funny.
'Haha... No way. What you fought was a human named Hreidmar. I'm sure you know that better than anyone.'
"......"

I could not say anything. Just as Major Loki pointed out, I—Fafnir—was certain that the armored soldier was human, but why was there nobody inside?
'That being said, this is a different Hreidmar from last time.'
I instantly realized in alarm when he added this sentence.
"Last time—You mean Hreidmar 05... Right?"
To approach the heart of the matter, I raised a further question.
'Oh...? To think you already know that, you truly surprise me. Although I don't know where you got that information from, that is correct. By the way, you just killed 04.'
Killed—This word made me tremble.
Indeed, I had stabbed a vital with a red-hot blade, because it was not an opponent I could show mercy to, because I could not defeat him without resolving to kill, because I hated enemies who endangered Mitsuki and the girls. However—
"If I killed him... There should be a corpse remaining."
I clenched my fist and objected.
'Yes... Normally speaking, that's correct, but they are not normal.'
"Not normal."
I gulped and repeated his words like a parrot.
'They wield great power. A great power for killing people. And power sometimes causes a being's appearance to change in nature. What you saw is the result of a deviating power.'
"Deviating... Don't tell me that NIFL is performing human modification—"
'—You fail to understand the fundamental point. It's the opposite, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. Rather than modifying people to obtain power, they were modified as a result of obtaining power.'
Interrupted by the deep and powerful voice, I halted mid-sentence. Major Loki's tone of voice sounded chillingly terrifying.
'Take dragons for instance. There are almost no living creatures like them. But being living creatures, they must have transformed dramatically from some kind of species to begin with, that would be the natural way of thinking about it. In that case, what was it that turned them into monsters?'
After a brief pause, Major Loki said solemnly:
'I believe it was due to power. What they possessed were abilities on the level of divine authority. Dragons acquired power and as a result, they gradually transformed into bodies suitable for using that power... Many things can be explained if you deduce logically from that. Wouldn't you agree?'
"Indeed, each dragon does possess characteristics close to organisms on Earth..."
Leviathan was aquatic mammalian, Basilisk was reptilian, Hraesvelgr was avian—The dragons we had confronted so far all featured characteristics similar to other creatures.

'In the same vein, after humans obtain a deviating power, there is nothing unbelievable about them changing in nature, is there?'
"...!"
However, I could not immediately answer Major Loki's next question. His voice, coming from Hreidmar's remains, sounded like a voice from a bottomless abyss, sinister and eerie.
"Major Loki, what are you talking about...? What the heck is Hreidmar?"
'I believe I've mentioned it before. A failed creation, nothing more.'
I felt as though a blade was pressed against my neck. Major Loki's words were too cold, too sharp.
'The reason of changing, the reason why change could not be avoided... Ultimately, the vessel's capacity was too low. Hence, if one remained unchanged even after obtaining power, now that would be truly valuable.'
The optical lenses located on the armored soldier's head made me feel as though Major Loki was staring at me from the lenses.
'...Don't you get it? I'm talking about you, 2nd Lieutenant Mononbe.'
"What—"
Hearing something so unexpected, I could not help but gasp.
'This battle has firmed my belief that you are almost complete now, to the point that I don't even need to finish up. Although I don't know why, you seem to have grasped the concept of "killing intent" at last.'
As though seeing through me, Major Loki made my heart rate rise. The dark and scorching feelings I embraced when I thought Mitsuki had been killed—The remains of those feelings burned the inside of my chest.
'Using that power to decide who lives and who dies... You are the one making that choice.'
It was Major Loki's message that I had heard from Miyazawa Kenya as well, the same words. Without getting drowned out by the waterfall noise, they reached my ear.
Boom—
Intense noise of combat could be heard in the villa's direction. Lisa's group was probably engaging the armored soldiers.
'However, I am also bound by duty to protect mankind. By any means necessary, I will prevent the worst-case scenario of "an increase in dragons"—through this method of "eliminating disasters before they germinate."'
His words made my spine shudder. Conveyed in Major Loki's voice was palpable killing intent.
The target of that killing intent were those whose dragon marks were changing in color—Mitsuki, Iris and the others.
"!?"
Getting a bad feeling, I looked for my communicator that had gotten knocked off during the battle. Although I did not think that Kili's group would lose to those drones, if Major Loki really wanted to execute those

whose dragon marks had changed in color—he would not limit himself to attacks of this level.
I found the communicator that had fallen on the bank, immediately put it on and yelled.
"This is Mononobe Yuu! What is the battle status?"
'Captain—Are you alright!? We are fine here.'
John's voice immediately responded, then I heard Kili and Lisa.
'We just defeated the last one.'
'How effortless. What about you, no problem, right?'
"Yeah, I'm done here too. No injuries."
I looked at the empty armor lying on the bank then replied. Perhaps because I had left, Major Loki's voice stopped too.
'This is Ariella. The enemy doesn't seem to have reinforcements.'
I also heard Ariella, who was deploying the air barrier. Based on reports alone, we had secured total victory.
—Was I overthinking things? No, I must have overlooked something...
Just as I racked my brain, Firill's voice came over the communicator.
'Phew... Finally settled, it seems. Even though it was mentioned that we have an escape passage in case of emergency... I was still so nervous.'
Escape passage—This term stimulated a corner of my mind.
Hold on... If the enemy took control of the villa's escape passage, then it could also serve as an invasion route—
"! —Shinomiya-sensei, can you hear me?"
'I hear you. What's the matter?'
I called out and immediately got a response. It seemed like nothing had happened yet.
"Please come outside the villa immediately! The enemy might exploit the escape passage, so outdoors should be safer than indoors at the moment."
'—Understood. Right away...'
However, Shinomiya-sensei's voice was drowned out by noise in abundance.
"Shinomiya-sensei!?"
'Clang—zxzxzxzx—thud—Kyah!—zxzxzxzxz—'
Amidst noise and intense collisions, I heard what sounded like someone's scream.
"What's wrong? Did something happen—"
'Thud—kxzxzxzxzx—'
I heard an intense and abnormal noise that seemed as it would rupture my eardrum.
Then almost at the same time, there was a louder explosion coming from the direction of the villa.
"—!"
I left the armored soldier's remains by the stream and ran as fast as I could.
No sooner had I received reports that the fighting had ended than the current explosion—

After passing through the forest path, the view broadened instantly broadened in front of me. The first thing I saw was the black smoke rising from various parts of the villa premises. A portion of the villa's roof had been blown away with thick smoke billowing out from within.
"Is everyone okay!? Hurry and report your status!!"
I ran at full speed while yelling into the communicator.
I looked towards the explosion's location, only to see fragments of armor falling on the ground. Probably self-destruction for elimination of evidence. Since an explosion had occurred inside the villa, it meant that the enemy had invaded the interior successfully.
—So it was the escape passage after all...!
I gnashed my teeth, regretting that I had not realized sooner. Major Loki had talked to me for so long, presumably to stall for time.
'—Lisa Highwalker reporting. I am fine.'
'I'm fine too, Yuu.'
First to answer were Lisa and Kili.
'Ariella Lu and Firill Crest. We're safe and sound.'
'I jumped in fright...'
Next, I heard Ariella and Firill's voices.
'...This is John Hortensia. Although the blast blew me away slightly—I am fine.'
I heard John's report shortly after, but no one inside the villa answered.
Iris, Mitsuki, Tia, Ren, Shinomiya-sensei and Vritra—That black dragon probably would not die just like that, but the rest of them were human and could not have remained unharmed if caught in the explosion.
"Damn it...!"
I cursed my error in judgment and ran desperately. Thinking there was no problem as long as I won—I had neglected to think further. Even if I defeated the enemy in front of me, it was pointless if I failed to protect everyone—
'What about everyone in the house...? We have to hurry and save them.'
Firill said anxiously.
'Entering might not be possible due to the fire and thick smoke! We must extinguish the fire first!'
Lisa rallied the group outside the villa to start putting out the fire.
Even at a distance from the villa, I could see water pouring down to extinguish the fire.
Presumably, they had transmuted a huge volume of water to rain down.
With four Ds, the amount of water must be staggering. By the time I arrived in front of the villa, the smoke had dissipated a lot while the fire was no longer visible.
Firill and Ariella continued to pour water from the air while Kili and Lisa worked from the ground. John anxiously watched the fire fighting effort and noticed me running there.
"Captain!"

"—I will check the interior, so please continue with the firefighting!"
Without stopping, I rushed into a smoking entrance.
"W-Wait! The smoke is still—"
I could hear Lisa's voice behind me but did not slow down. Holding my breath and lowering my posture, I advanced. Visibility was compromised due to the smoke but I remembered the layout of the rooms so there was no problem. If necessary, I could transmute air to safeguard my breathing.
Everyone was probably gathered in the caretaker's room with the surveillance monitors. I entered the living room from the entrance then walked towards caretaker's room on the inner end of the corridor. The smoke was coming from that direction.
While I was walking along the corridor, something cold struck my face. I looked up to see water falling through the smoke.
I could catch glimpses of the sky through gaps in the smoke. The second floor and the roof were probably destroyed by the explosion. Judging from the scene, the explosion apparently detonated near the caretaker's room.
—Please be safe, all of you.
I prayed while searching for signs of them. Immediately, there was a thud. I had collided with something resembling an invisible wall.
That strange feeling was neither hard nor soft. A barrier of air—
Then the wind blew, dispersing the surrounding smoke. With an improvement in visibility, the half-wrecked caretaker's room came into view. The ceiling was gone, monitors were shattered, the floor had sunk down, but in front of me—Only the center of the room was unnaturally intact. Over there were precisely the companions I was searching for.
With Ren in the center, holding her gigantic hammer of a fictional armament, Shinomiya-sensei, Tia and Vritra were standing there. Due to the fire persisting until just earlier, they were probably pinned down.
"Yuu!"
Tia instantly pounced into my bosom as I ran near.
"...Thank goodness, you all seem to be safe."
"Yes, Ren protected us. Tia wanted to fight but Ren said no."
Tia hugged me and answered.
"...Mm, I had a bad feeling because the enemy was not holding a weapon. So I chose defense over offense... But it was a close shave."
Ren nodded and answered, breathing a small sigh of relief. She must have deployed an air barrier in time to protect everyone.
"Thank you, Ren."
"Mm..."
I thanked her from the bottom of my heart but Ren looked away shyly.
"An armored soldier suddenly showed up when we spoke again. Were it not for Ren Miyazawa's air barrier, we would've been wiped out."
Shinomiya-sensei stood forward and summarized the situation concisely.
"Hmph... Were it not for such restraints, I could have suppressed the explosion for ye."

Vritra looked at the restraining vine in displeasure and remarked unhappily.
Seeing her say that, Tia was perhaps reminded of her job and separated from me to grab the other end of the vine.
"No, because you'll surely do something bad again. Tia won't release you!"
"C-Cease this, quit tugging! Thou art strangling my neck!"
Seeing them like that, I looked around with a wry smile.
"Eh? What about Iris—"
Seeing no signs of her, I could not help but frown.
"Oh, she said she wanted to stay by Mononobe Mitsuki's side—"
Shinomiya-sensei's expression and voice suddenly stiffened mid-sentence as she look upwards.
Oh right—Mitsuki was lying down in a room on the second floor. Wasn't it pretty much above here?
"!"
I turned around and made my way to the second floor of the villa.
Fortunately, the stairs were not broken but the second floor corridor was broken off in the middle.
Due to the explosion on the ground floor, the corridor and part of the room was blown away, leaving a hole in the ceiling.
"C-Cough, c-cough... Mitsuki, Iris..."
Due to panting, I accidentally inhaled smoke and coughed a few times.
The disaster had carved a frightening trail of destruction. Mitsuki's room was located at the tail end of the trail.
Pushing open the door that was about to fall off, I entered the room. The room was a mess due to the remains of the wall and roof damaged by the explosion, however, the bed where Mitsuki was sleeping was the one place where debris had been pushed away.
Mitsuki was lying on the bed while Iris sitting collapsed on the side. The two of them looked alive, but Iris' uniform was tattered all over with holes everywhere.
"Iris!"
I yelled out. Iris' shoulders shook and she suddenly looked back.
"Mononobe—D-Don't come over!"
She hugged herself and cried out, trying to cover up her tattered clothing. Rather than shame, what surfaced in her eyes were emotions of fear.
"...What's wrong? Are you hurt somewhere?"
"I-I'm fine! Neither Mitsuki nor I were injured, so... So—"
Iris shook her head in denial but her condition was clearly not normal.
"—!"
I stepped over rubble to approach Iris.
"Don't come over!"
Iris pulled the blanket off the bed to cover her body.
"...I can't leave you alone as you are now, Iris. Tell me what happened. Don't worry, no matter what happens, I will always stand on your side, Iris."

Iris was trembling when I stopped next to the bed and placed my hand on her head.
"Mononobe..."
Iris timidly looked up at me, gripping the blanket tightly, bt the fearful look on her face still remained.
"You protected Mitsuki, right...? Thank you, Iris."
I looked at Mitsuki who was unconscious on the bed and expressed my gratitude to Iris. She must have responded to what I said to her about leaving Mitsuki in her care.
"...Yes, when the big noise happened... The ceiling and the wall collapsed... I—instantly pounced on top of Mitsuki, but so much debris struck me, it was painful and heavy... I thought I was going to be crushed to death."
Iris stammered with a tone of unease as she recounted what had happened.
"You must've been scared... I'm sorry I wasn't by your side."
I apologized to her but Iris shook her head lightly.
"No, it's not your fault, Mononobe. But I was definitely scared. I was scared of what if I failed to protect Mitsuki... Then while I was desperately enduring... The pain suddenly went away and power surged from within."
Iris stopped here and looked at me with eyes as though she was seeking someone to rely on.
"Iris...?"
"Mononobe, you won't hate me no matter what I become, right?"
Iris asked me with an anxious expression. Although I had no idea what it was about, I was able to answer this question without hesitation.
"That goes without saying."
After I asserted firmly, Iris looked relieved and released the blanket. What came into view as the blanket slid down was the tattered uniform underneath.
"—I easily pushed away the rubble that was supposed to be very heavy. Then after that, I looked at where I should've been injured—And it had become like this."
Iris rolled up her sleeve to show me. Her skin had turned red at exactly the part where her clothing was torn.
My first thought was a bruise—But that was wrong. Lit by sunlight streaming through the porous ceiling, the reddened portion glinted with the luster of hard texture.
"Red... scales?"
I gasped and stammered blankly.
"Yes... Although I can't see it myself, probably my back too—"
Iris nodded and turned her back to me. Perhaps due to getting hit directly by debris, there was a large hole in her uniform, exposing her skin.
Red and hard scales also appeared there.
"This is—"
Iris probably sensed my reaction. Looking like she was about to burst into tears, she forced a stiff smile and said:

"What's with... me? This is almost like—Basilisk's scales."
That was what I thought of too but intentionally kept quiet about. Basilisk's body was covered in red diamond scales.
'Dragons acquired power and as a result, they gradually transformed into bodies suitable for using that power... Many things can be explained if you deduce logically from that. Wouldn't you agree?'
Major Loki's words resurfaced in my mind.
No, that was impossible. Iris was not the only person to inherit a dragon's power. Mitsuki, Tia and I had all obtained powers from dragons.
However, why was Iris the only one—
"Hey Mononobe... Will I turn into a real dragon?"
Iris held my hand with her trembling hand.
Her hand did not have the hard texture of scales. It was both soft and very warm—

*

"Captain..."
Jeanne Hortensia was outdoors, looking at the smoking villa from afar.
What flashed in her mind was Mononobe Yuu's face as he entered the house with reckless abandon.
His countenance had been so desperate and worried.
Back when he was serving as Sleipnir's captain, he would never show such a look.
However, this did not disillusion her. Apart from respect towards him for showing more of a human touch than before, she found him more endearing.
What changed him was surely those girls.
Jeanne looked around at the Ds who continued with their firefighting and sighed lightly.
"I suppose they are Captain's 'good fortune'..."
She whispered words that probably no one would understand except herself.
Good fortune—To Jeanne, that was a special term.
Her life had been influenced by luck far too much.
The misfortune of her family dying in civil war and the good fortune of surviving alone. The misfortune of losing her country to war and the good fortune of getting taken in by an army, thus finding a place to live and survive. The misfortune of only going to battlefields and the good fortune of having a talent useful for being a soldier—
Coincidence unrelated to her own decisions and actions—Finding herself swept away by gigantic tides beyond her control time and again, she even directed her resentment towards god in the past.
But for the sake of surviving, ultimately, she could only rely on luck.
Plucking out those rare instances of good fortune out of countless coincidences—Never letting good fortune slip out of her hand, that was how she kept herself alive.

It had occurred to her that sticking to such a lifestyle, she would probably get killed by misfortune eventually.
What she had faced was her first battle after getting assigned to the special operations team, Sleipnir—
An enemy detachment had discovered Jeanne's hiding place while she was standing by at her sniping position, thus putting her in a crisis.
Her tightrope of a life was about to end there.
Just as she was about to give up, *he* showed up.
'It's fortunate that I was nearby—*You have such good luck*.'
After dispatching enemy forces single-handedly, Mononobe Yuu had said to her calmly while extending his hand to Jeanne, who was collapsed on the ground.
'Thank you... Captain.'
Holding his hand made her feel like she had grasped the greatest good fortune of her life so far.
And at the same time, she could not help but think to herself—I don't want to let go.
Respect for strength and gratitude for saving her life, these feelings were mixed together. By the time she realized, he had already become someone special to her.
The reason why she was able to abandon Sleipnir, her shelter, was because she was convinced that he was the greatest good fortune.
When Mononobe Yuu was facing the unidentified threat known as Hreidmar, Jeanne had worked with Kili, wanting to become the good fortune that would rescue him.
But to support him now, she alone was probably not enough.
"......"
Hence, Jeanne looked up at the mountain villa and prayed silently.
—I hope he and his good fortune will be safe and sound.

Chapter 3 - "Purple" Kraken Zwei

Part 1

"—I never imagined I'd ever fly in the sky while riding a vehicle."
Through the window of a large van, I looked at the distant ground beneath, commenting poignantly.
Outside the window, Lisa and the others could be seen flying while wielding their fictional armaments. A large-scale barrier of air maintained by six people, Lisa, Firill, Ren, Ariella, Tia and Kili, was keeping the vehicle levitated.
They had used wind before to control Mistleteinn in the past, which was much bigger than a car, so this was probably a piece of cake. However, it felt even more surreal precisely because we were traveling in a car, such an ordinary form of everyday transportation.
We were supposed to refrain from conspicuous actions of this sort, but to evade Major Loki's pursuit, we had to leave that mountain villa as quickly as possible.
"Yeah... It feels very unbelievable."
Sitting next to me, Iris smiled wryly in response. She was wearing the jacket I lent her to cover up the scales on her skin. I had yet to report her body's change to anyone, because Iris refused to let them know.
Although the secret could not be kept indefinitely, I decided to wait for Iris to settle her emotions first. After all, Iris' feelings were the most important —
"But with this, NIFL cannot pursue either. Once we find a location that is difficult to reach by land, we'll be able to prevent another attack like the one just now."
Sitting opposite to me, John joined the conversation.
The back seats in the large van were arranged in opposing rows. Sitting here were Iris, John and I who had no flying skills, the sleeping Mitsuki, as well as the restrained Vritra. Shinomiya-sensei was in the driver's seat, giving orders to the girls outside through her communicator.
"Yes... But before the Kraken Zwei problem is resolved, Major Loki probably won't cut us any slack. No matter where, we can't lower our guard."
I remarked bitterly. The only reason why we had no casualties this time was because of good luck and Ren's quick reaction. Before Major Loki launches his next wave of attacks, we must resolve the matter.
"That mountain villa was supposed to be a safe place too..."
Iris spoke in a feeble tone of voice.

According to the original plan, the members not participating in the operation would stay back and standby at the villa. But after such an attack, we could no longer leave them and Mitsuki behind.
Thus, all of us were moving to a place near the designated location for the operation, then set up a base of operations there.
"Always noisy all day long, thou art rather quiet today. What happened—to thee?"
Seeign Iris in low spirits, Vritra asked her.
"Eh? Oh, umm... Nothing!"
Iris made a guilty look then hugged herself tightly.
"Yes, very well."
Despite looking at her suggestively, Vritra stopped talking and did not ask anymore.
Speaking of which, when we were checking the color change in the dragon marks, Vritra had said something mysterious about Iris' condition.
Perhaps Vritra might actually know something about the change happening to Iris' body.
Although I doubted if she would tell me honestly... I decided to find an opportunity to ask anyway.
Watching Vritra's nonchalant face from the side, I pondered the matter. At this moment, Shinomiya-sensei looked back at us.
"—A suitable location has been found. We will land here."
Pressing the communicator to speak, Shinomiya-sensei announced to us.
Due to the air barrier surrounding us, we could not feel the pressure and temperature outside, but seeing the scenery of lush mountains gradually getting closer, I knew that we were descending.
This was a mountainous area covered in forests and peaks without any houses in sight. Contact with Kraken Zwei was set to take place in this area.
I saw Firill flying outside. She approached and knocked on the window then pointed at a lake below. We were apparently going to land near there.
It looked like a volcanic crater lake, surrounded by towering rocky mountains and quite difficult to approach from the ground.
The van slowly landed on the lake shore with slight shaking from the impact.
"We're there."
The van's door opened and a cool breeze caressed my face. Before my eyes was a lake with clear blue water.
Disembarking, I felt the sensation of soft grassland under the soles of my shoes.
"Come, Iris."
I extended my hand towards Iris who was just about to get off after me.
"...Thanks."
Iris held my hand somewhat shyly and jumped nimbly from the van.
At this moment, the girls dispelled their fictional armaments and gathered around.

"Given this place, we can detect the invasion of enemies just by watching the sky above."
Sweeping her eyes across the mountain range encircling the lake, Lisa nodded with satisfaction.
"What a beautiful lake. If there's time, I really want to fish."
Ariella approached the shore and stared at the water surface.
"Tia wants to swim!"
"Hmm... The air temperature might be a bit low for swimming."
Firill smiled wryly when Tia raised her hand and made her suggestion. Ren also rubbed her exposed arms and nodded in agreement.
"Mm, it's a bit cold."
However, Kili shrugged in exasperation after listening to them.
"If you're Ds, why don't you just think slightly out of the box and use your powers? If you feel cold, then create a heat source."
Kili created a small fireball on her hand and smiled.
"...So warm."
Ren placed her hands over the flames and closed her eyes partially in comfort.
"Using our powers for something mundane like warmth... It's true that I never thought that way before."
Firill remarked, somewhat impressed.
"Because we basically use our powers only for fighting dragons. However, that's fine the way it is, because it's not a good idea to rely on powers in everyday life."
Hearing Lisa say that, Kili frowned in puzzlement.
"Why? Isn't it a waste to have powers and not use them?"
"You look like you grew up in rather special circumstances... But don't forget that Ds lose their powers upon reaching adulthood, okay? You will be in trouble then if you rely on your powers excessively."
Lisa had pointed something matter-of-fact, but Kili reacted with a surprised look.
"Ds losing their powers upon adulthood—That's true, but I never paid attention to this problem. Mother, will that happen to me too?"
Kili asked Vritra, who was disembarking together with John.
"...Of course. Thou simply hast excellent abilities but art fundamentally no different from Ds."
Restrained by a vine, Vritra squirmed involuntarily while she answered.
"Really? So my powers will disappear. I don't really like that."
Kili stared at her hand and murmured. Most likely for Kili, the ability to generate dark matter had already become an integral part of her being.
"Become a true dragon if thou dost not wish to lose thy powers. Besides, *the purpose of Ds' powers is to evolve their bodies into dragons*. Hence, 'tis only natural for their powers to disappear once their bodies mature and can no longer synchronize with dragons."

While Kili was immersed in her thoughts, Vritra spoke in an authoritative tone to her.
"What—"
Listening on the side, Lisa and the others gasped, because Vritra had nonchalantly revealed key information regarding the mystery of the existences known as Ds.
However, Kili apparently knew this already. Without showing surprise, she simply made a wry smile.
"Actually, Mother, I don't mind becoming a dragon. It's just that I want to select my partner. When will you approve of him, Mother?"
Kili approached me all of a sudden and locked arms with me.
"H-Hey, Kili..."
I wanted to get away from her but Kili refused, sticking closely to me. Her bosom was pressing tightly against my arm. The soft sensation was halting my thoughts.
"Kili! How many times do I have to repeat myself? Stop sticking to the Captain!"
"T-That's right! Kili-chan! You're troubling Mononobe!"
John and Iris protested together, but Kili ignored them, staring at Vritra.
"...Hmph, never. Although he appeareth to be no ordinary irregular, given his caliber, he cannot surpass the second generation."
Vritra turned her face away.
"Oh...? Then it's fine once Yuu defeats Kraken Zwei? So there you go, Yuu... For our future's sake, you have to do your best."
Kili pressed herself harder against me, whispering gently to me extremely up close.
"No, we're not going to defeat Kraken Zwei, we're persuading her first—"
"Listen here, distance yourself from him right away!"
I was trying to argue when Lisa forcibly pulled me away from Kili.
"Kili sticks to Yuu too much!"
Tia rushed in between Kili and me.
"...Mm, Onii-chan, come over here."
Ren tugged my sleeve in a huff, taking me somewhere far away from Kili.
"Eh? Ren, are you jealous?"
"—Ooh..."
As soon as Ariella commented, Ren immediately went bright red and released my arm.
Firill approached at this time and say to me with a mischievous expression:
"Mononobe-kun, if you're considering the future... You do have the choice of becoming a prince, you know?"
"C-Come on..."
I scratched my head, unsure how to respond.
"—Idle chatter ends here, everyone. I will explain our plan from here on."
At this moment, a stern voice caused the relaxed atmosphere to tense up.

Shinomiya-sensei disembarked from the driver's seat and looked at us with a cellphone in her hand. Everyone's expression turned serious and we faced Shinomiya-senssei.
"According to the latest news just received, Kraken Zwei is moving towards us just as we predicted. Given her movement speed, reaching this location will require three hours approximately, but of course, we will not allow her to come into contact with those whose dragon marks have changed color."
Shinomiya-sensei finished in a strong tone of voice and swept her gaze across us.
"Right now, she is crossing the mountain range. As soon as she enters the plain, we will approach and attempt persuasion. The reason why we avoid high ground is to prevent her from firing antimatter over a broad area in the event that a battle breaks out."
"If she were to shower antimatter down from high ground, we really would not have anywhere to escape..."
Lisa concurred with Shinomiya-sensei.

"The operation will start forty minutes from now. Just as I explained earlier, the persuasion team will consist of myself, Mononobe Yuu and John Hortensia, the three of us. Iris Freyja, Lisa Highwalker, Firill Crest and Tia Lightning, you four will standby at your designated sniping locations. I will send the locations to your portable terminals later."
After explaining, Shinomiya-sensei turned her gaze to Ariella and the others who had not been called upon.
"The rest of you will wait here for us to return. However, please keep a close eye on Mononobe Mitsuki's condition and do not relax your surveillance on Vritra. To guard against NIFL's attacks, Ariella Lu and Ren Miyazawa, I hope you two will take turns to deploy an air barrier."
"Understood."
"Mm."
Ariella and Ren nodded firmly.
"Then the briefing is over. Until ten minutes before the operation, you have time to rest."
Leaving these instructions, Shinomiya-sensei returned to the van.
Left behind, we looked at one another, unsure what to do.
"—I got dirty during the earlier battle, so I'm taking a bath. Tia, come along if you want to swim, okay?"
Kili pointed at her arms and legs that had been blackened by smoke then invited Tia to go with her.
Due to the explosion at the mountain villa, we were all covered by a fair amount of soot.
"Great! Oh, but in that case, it's better if everyone went! Lisa, all of you come too!"
Pulling Lisa's hand, Tia called to everyone.
"...I wanted a bath in the first place, so I have no objections."
Concerned about the soot on her hair and skin, Lisa nodded.
"I'll go too. It won't be cold as long as we create a heat source, which can also serve as a hair dryer too."
Firill agreed excitedly.
"Let's go, given the chance."
"Mm."
Ariella and Ren also nodded in agreement, then looked at the remaining Iris.
"I-I'll pass, because I have some scratches from when the explosion caused the room to collapse... Getting water on my skin will sting."
Wearing my jacket, Iris shook her head and declined with a stiff expression.
The red scales appearing on her skin would be exposed if she undressed.
Hence, bathing was definitely out of the question for her at the moment.
"I'll look after Mitsuki-chan! So don't mind me and enjoy yourselves, everyone."
As though fleeing, Iris entered the van where Mitsuki was sleeping.

"Iris-san... She has been acting strangely since the earlier battle. Do you know something about it?"
Lisa asked me.
"Well—"
I reflexively wanted to cover it up, but stopped myself halfway, because lying definitely did not work on Lisa.
"...I know, but I can't say it right now."
So I changed what I was planning to say.
"Is that so? Then please tell me when a suitable time comes."
Lisa made a helpless expression and did not question further.
"Then let us go over there to bathe... I won't forgive you if you dare peek, okay?"
Lisa poked me in the forehead with her index finger then went with the others to the other side of the bushes.
"I don't mind if you peek, okay? Rather, I should say that it doesn't bother me if you want to bathe together."
Kili smiled seductively and waved to call me over, but Lisa scolded "of course that is unacceptable!" and dragged Kili away.
"Then Captain, I will go wash my face a bit."
Watching that sort of scene, John smiled wryly at me with his soot-stained face, then walked in the opposite direction from Lisa and the girls.
This left only Vritra and me by the van. While Kili and Tia were bathing, it looked like I had to supervise her, however—This turned out to be perfect.
"Vritra, I need to have a word with you."
"...Regarding what?"
Vritra looked up and glared at me, asking with displeasure.
"This isn't a good place to talk, so let's go somewhere else."
I glanced sideways at the van then walked to some nearby shrubbery. This was because I did not know if Iris should hear this.
Vritra followed obediently. I pushed the bushes apart and stopped at a slightly open space. I looked back to see that the van was no longer in view.
"So—What business dost thou have? By any chance, art thou taking me to a deserted location, intending to make my body your plaything..."
"Of course not! I have a question for you."
I yelled at her then went straight to the point.
"About Iris, what do you know?"
"By 'what,' thou art referring to...?"
Vritra frowned, cocking her head in puzzlement.
"You said something suggestive when you found out that only Iris' dragon mark had slowed down its color change, right? Something about 'perfectly possible' or 'it doesn't matter which outcome'—Please tell me if you know something."
"The way thou art acting... As one would expect, she hath changed, yes?"
She must have noticed while we were talking in the van. Vritra narrowed her eyes and replied.

"...Yes."
Despite hesitating, I still nodded and admitted it. Since I wanted to go deeper in the conversation, I could not hide things from Vritra.
"I see—But as said previously, I have no obligation to tell thee."
"I know, but even so, I still hope you can tell me—Please."
I bowed my head deeply to beg and immediately heard a tiny sigh.
"To think I expected thee to threaten or torture me... Bowing thy head to plead, how unexpected. Why wilt thou go this far?"
"Because Iris is in pain."
I answered with my face towards the ground but did not hear a reply. The wind blew and the grass rustled.
After a long silence, Vritra spoke.
"Very well—I shall tell thee, for her sake if not for thine. 'Tis merely defiance against thee when I declined to say previously. In truth, thou art powerless even if I were to tell thee. Moreover, 'tis no loss to me."
"Really!?"
I looked up but Vritra's countenance staring at me was cold and merciless.
"Indeed, yet in mine opinion, 'twould only cause thee to despair."
After saying that, Vritra leaned her back against a nearby tree trunk.
"Despair...?"
"I said thou art powerless, yes? Because she shall merely become the next Basilisk, as a result of inheriting the authority."
"What—"
It was the worst-case scenario that had existed in a corner of my mind, impossible to dispel. And Vritra's words confirmed my imagination. I could not help but gasp.
"Creatures turning into dragons after inheriting an authority, 'tis a phenomenon that hath happened multiple times. 'White' Leviathan's predecessor was 'Silver' Tiamat. On the other hand, 'Yellow' Hraesvelgr had inherited its authority from 'Gold' Phoenix before turning into a dragon. Just like her—"
"Wait! If inheriting power means turning into a dragon, why haven't changes appeared in Mitsuki or me?"
I interrupted Vritra and pointed out the contradiction. Calling me powerless—How could I possibly accept that?
"Thy sister most likely did not inherit the full authority. The Kraken's child using antimatter is proof of that. As for thee, the authorities thou usest are far too weak compared to the original dragons."
Indeed, I could not bring out power on the level of Leviathan or Hraesvelgr. At my level, all I could do was recreate a tiny part of the effects by using dark matter transmutation. Unlike Iris, I could not directly use the powers I had inherited from dragons.
"'Tis unclear whether due to incomplete inheritance or the inability to control beyond one's own capacity... Or some other reason. I know not the correct answer. However, among ye Ds, she—Iris Freyja—is the only one

capable of using an authority equal to or surpassing the original dragon in scale. Only her."
Vritra spoke in a calm tone of voice.
Now that she mentioned it... The battle against Yggdrasil, the battle against Kraken Zwei, the battle against Vritra—With every battle, Iris' Catastrophe seemed to increase in power. Ariella had also pointed out that Iris had even surpassed Basilisk in power.
"...Suppose that's true, is there really nothing I can do?"
"Indeed, 'tis legitimate evolution that is occurring in her. Neither injury nor disease, 'tis only the vessel changing its shape to match the contents. Even if thou forcest the change to a halt, the end result will be the vessel's destruction."
"...!"
I gasped and clenched my fist.
"The slowing in the dragon mark's change in color is because her nature as a dragon has increased in comparison to her nature as a D. She shall become the one who chooseth rather than one who is chosen. Even if thou defeatest the Kraken's child, next will be her turn to—"
"Don't say anymore!!"
Unable to bear it, I yelled. I did not want to hear more... because even without listening, I understood.
"—Hoo, in other words, this is the reason why I said it mattereth not which outcome. Very well... Hast thou anything more to say?"
"Right..."
Although there seemed to be something else I should ask, my mind was in chaos at the moment. How should I explain this to Iris? What should I do next... My thoughts were impossible to organize.
"Then as a reward for providing information, thou shouldst agree to a request of mine."
"...What is it? I'll say this first. I won't release your bonds."
Although the majority of my thoughts were occupied with Iris' matter, I still asked out of obligation.
However, Vritra shook her head and explained her demand.
"Take me to the water and wash my face. My face itcheth."
Hearing her say that, I noticed that Vritra's face was a bit dirty. However, since her upper body was all tied up, she could not wipe with her hands.
"No problem, if it's just something like that."
Feeling a little surprised, I nodded and accepted her request.
"Very well, sally forth."
Perhaps it itched quite badly, Vritra hurried me with her movements.
I sighed and took her to the water's edge.
At the same time, I searched my mind desperately, trying to find the right words for the next time I saw Iris—

Part 2

"Control thy force, too strenuous."
"You're so demanding..."
I washed Vritra's face while sighing.
We were at the lake shore where there was a large patch of gravel. Since we had gone to a place opposite in direction to where Lisa and the girls were bathing, there was no worry of running into them.
I dipped my handkerchief into the transparent lake water, wetting it, then gently wiped Vritra's face.
"So cold."
"Bear with it when it's just this much."
Her cheeks were soft yet elastic. While wiping off the soot from her face, I really felt as though I was looking after a little girl.
"—Okay, this should be good enough. Done?"
After confirming that her face was clean, I asked Vritra.
"If possible, I wish to wash my hair and body too... Forget it. I shall endure for now."
"You're quite complacent despite clearly being a captive..."
I looked in exasperation at Vritra whose attitude was inexplicably haughty. Although I wanted to mock her a bit, I did not have the energy because my thoughts were all occupied with Iris.
"—Then let's head back."
I urged Vritra and walked towards the van's direction along the lake side.
To come here just now, we had passed through the forest surrounding the lake, which was quite difficult due to the dense foliage. However, there was no such problem when walking along the rocky lake shore and no danger of tripping either.
"Thou walkest too fast. Accommodate my pace."
Perhaps because of the easy walk, my pace quickened naturally. Vritra grumbled at me.
"Oh, sorry."
After apologizing, I paced myself to accommodate Vritra's little strides but for some reason, she looked surprised.
"...Wherefore art thou apologizing? Art thou not going to tell me to bear with it this time?"
"Well, I'm currently at fault, right?"
"Forsooth—Hmm... I understand too little of thee."

Vritra cocked her head, walking side by side with me.
In this manner, we advanced along the lake shore, only to encounter a giant rock blocking our way. Or maybe it was volcanic cinder. Either way, we had to make a detour around it by going through the forest.
However, when I circled around the rock, pushed aside the bushes and arrived at the lake's edge again—I was confronted with an unexpected sight.
"Huh—?"
Looking back over her shoulder in surprise, frozen to the spot, was John with his upper body naked.
Perhaps he was in the middle of wiping his body. John was sitting at the water's edge with a wet towel in his hand. His removed jacket was hanging on a nearby rock.
However, that was not the problem.
Pale skin as tender as milk, a narrow waist, as well as a bulging chest that did not belong to a man—
"Hyah!?"
John screamed and covered his chest with both arms.
"J-John?"
Was he—she—really John Hortensia? Uncertain, I called his name hesitantly.
"W-W-W-W-Why is the Captain here when the van was clearly on that side —"
Gone as white as a ghost, she cried out. Since Vritra and I had arrived from the opposite direction, it looked like she had been caught by surprise. Wait, by the way, since she called me 'Captain'—So she was John after all?
"I, uh, I was just helping Vritra wash her face..."
I motioned with my eyes to Vritra who was walking out from the bushes, then turned to face John.
"Putting that aside..."
"Y-Yes sir."
John gulped and waited for me to speak.
"John... So you're actually... a girl?"
I asked her in confirmation, unable to hide my confoundment.
"I am a man."
However, John asserted firmly, hiding her chest.
"Huh? But—"
"I am a man."
I frowned but John repeated himself with stronger emphasis.
"...Isn't that a bit unconvincing given the circumstances?"
"I am a man!"
With tears appearing in her eyes, John yelled with some resignation.
I scratched my head, unsure what to make of the situation.
"......Whatever, anyway, put your clothes on first. I'll look away for now."
Unsure where to look, I turned around.

Her bare skin was so beautiful that I could not help but stare in a trance. Even though she had covered the important parts, I still found it difficult to calm myself.
"O-Okay..."
John replied stiffly then I heard the sound of clothing rustling.
"Thou tellst me, what on earth is the situation?"
Vritra frowned, apparently baffled and inquired of me.
"...I haven't grasped the situation either."
"Hmm..?"
Hearing my answer, Vritra showed even greater puzzlement on her face.
"—Captain, I am ready now."
I looked back to see the familiar John dressed in military uniform.
Her feminine curves were cleverly disguised. Neither could the bulging of her chest be seen.
"That's amazing... Now you look totally like a man."
"Of course, because I am a man."
Seeing John say that with a nonchalant expression, I looked at her in utter exasperation.
"No, I'm not going to be fooled no matter what, you know? But if you don't want to talk about it, I won't pry..."
I sighed. After hearing that, John trembled and collapsed on her knees as though it was too much to bear.
"Oooh... So it won't work after all?"
Seeing her moist eyes staring at me, I felt my heart pounding like mad. Now that I was aware that she was female, her prim and proper face seemed to look even more beautiful than before.
"Sorry, but—If you really don't want the others to know, I'll definitely keep your secret."
Rather than surprise, I felt sorry for her so I apologized.
"No, Captain, you were the only one I wanted to keep the secret from... It's fine even if you tell the others. Or rather, some of them already now."
Supporting herself with her hands on the ground, John shook her head in dejection.
"You mean Kili?"
Since they had been working together for a while, it would not be strange for her to know.
"Yes... There is also Ariella Lu who fought me at Erlia..."
"Oh right, that reminds me. Ariella and you were exchanging mysterious words earlier."
I recalled what had happened at the stream, so I muttered.
Ever since the encounter at the Principality of Erlia, Ariella already knew John's real gender huh...?
I remembered back then, Ariella had told me to ask for his real name the next time we met.
"Can you tell me your real name?"

"—Jeanne. Jeanne Hortensia."
John—no, Jeanne—replied softly.
"What? That's pretty much the same. Should I call you John or Jeanne from now one—Which do you prefer?"
Hearing me ask that, Jeanne looked up at me with a surprised look.
"From now on...? Captain, you're not angry?"
Jeanne asked me in a tone of trepidation.
"Huh? Why should I be angry?"
Despite my surprise, I could not think of any reason to be angry.
"Because I have deceived you the whole time... All that trust built up till now... Bonds between men, everything is now moot, right?"
Jeanne answered in a feeble voice, her eyes watching me uneasily.
"Everyone has secrets—Me too. And in your case, your gender was your secret, that's all. Our experiences as teammates doesn't get written off just like that."
"Captain..."
Her pallid face starting to regain color.
"And you must have some kind of reason, right?"
"Yes, but it's nothing special. Because posing as a man is more convenient in the military... People are less likely to belittle you and I can avoid unnecessary trouble. It's just that..."
"—After I was assigned to Sleipnir, I wanted to win your approval, Captain... I didn't want to show my weakness, so I tried even harder than before to play the part of a strong man. That is why I was thinking, if you were to find out I am female, surely your impression of me will be ruined..."
Clenching her fist, she confessed the reason to me in a hoarse voice.
"Of course I won't do that. Whether you are male or female, you're still the best sniper."
I smiled wryly and told her that my opinion of her remained unchanged.
"Ooh..."
Jeanne's shoulders shook as she bit her lip, her golden eyes growing moist from tears.
"C-Captaaaaaaain!! I will follow you for the rest of my life!!"
Crying tears of emotion, Jeanne hugged me.
"H-Hey—"
If it were before, I would not falter, but after knowing she was female, it did bother me a bit.
Even hidden under clothing, the touch of her body remained soft. I could also smell a faint fragrance from her neck.
"Ooh... Captain... Captain!"
However, if I pushed her away by force now, I would be betraying what I had said about not changing my opinion of her, so I endured my embarrassment and patted her lightly on the back.
At this time, with Jeanne in between, I met Vritra's gaze.

Completely ignored on the side, Vritra was watching with an impatient look on her face.
"—Humans are truly creatures that agonize over inane matters. To think one would alter one's appearance over concerns of other people's opinion... What folly."
Vritra shook her head as though it was impossible to comprehend. Jeanne simply cried in my bosom, not listening to her at all.
"Really? But you changed yourself to this form in order to talk to Tia, right?"
"Hmm... 'Tis only to accommodate Yggdrasil's core."
Vritra looked at her body and her lips became bent in a frown. However, it was undeniably true that she had altered her own appearance for the sake of negotiations, so she did not argue any further.
To build up good relationships with others, sometimes it was necessary to change yourself.
—Was it really right for us to go ahead like this to persuade Kraken Zwei?
Suddenly, that thought occurred to me.
But of course, I did not know we should do either. Since we could not change our appearances like Vritra, our only choice was to face Kraken Zwei as humans.
"..."
Iris' face flashed in my mind. I shook my head.
Kraken Zwei was born between a dragon and a human—a D. Then there was Iris, who was gradually transforming into a dragon as a result of acquiring immense power.
Right now, the one closest to Kraken Zwei—might possibly be Iris.
I could not help but feel furious at myself for thinking such thoughts.

Part 3

Once Jeanne's emotions had calmed, we returned to the van's location. Kili and the girls were already back from their bath.
"Hey Yuu, where did you go? We were waiting the whole time for you to peek, you know?"
With her hand on her hip, Kili complained to me.
"Hold on, Kili-san! I was certainly not waiting for him!"
However, Lisa corrected her.
"My, oh really? While we were bathing, you seemed quite unsettled the whole time."
"I-I was purely being vigilant against voyeurs."
"Oh, but—"
Just as Kili was about to joke with Lisa again, she seemed to realize something and stopped mid-sentence.
"Oh dear, John, your eyes are red. Don't tell me something happened?"
Kili cocked her head, seemingly intrigued, and asked Jeanne.
"......"
Jeanne avoided eye contact with a complicated expression. Seeing her like that, Kili said quietly:
"No way... Did you get found out?"
"...Indeed."
In response to Kili's query, Jeanne nodded lightly to admit.
"However... The Captain's magnanimity was greater than I imagined. He still acknowledged me even after knowing my secret, he accepted everything about me!"
Jeanne clenched her fist and spoke with fervor.
"...What happened?"
Unclear what the situation was, Firill came over and asked.
"Oh, basically the fact that she's actually a girl. Although it's a shame that I've lost material to make fun of her—But now I can call her Jeanne-chan regardless of who's around."
Kili shrugged and answered, instantly causing a commotion among the girls.
"Jeanne-chan? So that's her real name?"
Tia asked with surprise all over her face.
"Yes, it's a nice name that suits her well, right?"
Kili replied, smiling happily.
"To be honest, I knew from the start."

"Mm... Ariella, no fair."
Ariella smiled wryly while Ren looked out from behind her back, protesting quietly.
"John-san—no, I suppose I should call you Jeanne-san now? I initially thought you were quite delicate... But never did I suspect you were a girl—"
Lisa scrutinized Jeanne from head to foot and back a number of times, then remarked in an impressed tone of voice.
"...By the way, I'm personally more curious about Mononobe-kun accepting everything about her."
Saying that, Firill looked at me coldly.
"Mononobe-kun, what did you do to her? Don't tell me... The instant you found out her gender, you couldn't repress your desire—"
"How is that even possible!?"
I yelled at Firill and Jeanne nodded vigorously too.
"Indeed. The Captain won't do that sort of thing. Instead he was gentle—he simply hugged me."
In that instant, my skin could feel the girls' gazes on me turning icy cold.
"Mononobe-kun... You're so unfaithful."
Firill pouted and glared at me.
"I can't really support such behavior..."
"Mm."
Ariella looked exasperated while Ren agreed with her.
"(glare)..."

I felt an extra sharp and stinging gaze, only to see Iris narrowing her eyes at me from the van's window.
"No, I wasn't thinking anything dirty!"
I protested, mainly to explain to Iris.
"Oh? But in such a situation... Mitsuki-chan would surely say 'Nii-san is such a jerk,' wouldn't she?"
"Urgh..."
"—Mononobe is such a jerk."
Iris pouted and withdrew into the van.
"H-Hey—"
I hastily tried to enter the van, but just at that moment, Shinomiya-sensei looked out from the driver's seat.
"Please assemble, everyone! The situation has changed."
We looked at one another then gathered around Shinomiya-sensei who had gotten out of the driver's seat. Despite feeling bothered by my affairs and withdrawing herself into the van, Iris still came outside.
"Shinomiya-sensei, did something happen?"
Lisa asked on everyone's behalf and Shinomiya-sensei nodded bitterly.
"Yes. Kraken Zwei is moving faster than predicted."
"Meaning she suddenly accelerated...? But why—"
Firill tilted her head in puzzlement.
"The reason is this."
Shinomiya-sensei declared stiffly then showed us the screen on her portable terminal.
Shown there was Kraken Zwei, entirely wrapped in silver hair. Although her appearance was the same as before, there seemed to be—something not quite right.
"She grew bigger..."
Only after hearing Ariella's murmur did I realize what was wrong. Because a transmission tower in the background looked especially tiny.
"Ariella Lu is correct. Kraken Zwei is moving faster because she has grown in size. Currently, the body length is roughly fifteen meters."
Kili examined the screen carefully and brought her hand to the side of her mouth.
"Rather than her body itself growing in size, it's more like the mithril hair, which serves as her limbs, has extended in length. If dark matter was used for biogenic transmutation, then such a change occurring in this short amount of time is also—!"
However, she held her right hand mid-sentence. The dragon mark was glowing intensely with purple light.
"It hurts..."
Tia and the others, whose dragon marks were still changing in color, all pressed their hands on the locations of their respective dragon marks.
"W-What's wrong, everyone? Ah, Ren, are you okay?"
Iris panicked and showed concern for Ren, who had crouched down.

Judging from what I could see, the dragon mark symptoms did not affect Iris.
'The slowing in the dragon mark's change in color is because her nature as a dragon has increased in comparison to her nature as a D.'
Without warning, Vritra's earlier words placed reality before my eyes.
I spontaneously looked towards the van, only to see a faint purple glow leaking from the inside.
"—!"
I ran to the van and peered inside. As expected, the light source was the neck of Mitsuki who was lying down on the seats.
"Oooh..."
Stuck in deep slumber all this time, Mitsuki moaned in pain.
"Mitsuki!"
I approached and held Mitsuki's hand, calling her name.
"......Miyako."
From Mitsuki's mouth, moaning as though yearning for air, I heard a faint sound.
What she said was the name of the best friend whom she had personally executed.
Was Mitsuki having a nightmare of that time? Or did she superimpose Miyako with the Kraken Zwei that was seeking her? I could not tell.
But the dragon mark's increased glow also conveyed clearly to me Kraken Zwei's determination to take Mitsuki and the other girls.
"I will protect you."
I swore to my precious and beloved little sister then exited the vehicle.
Everyone's gaze was focused on me.
"The glow of Mitsuki's dragon mark has also increased. That's probably because Kraken Zwei is approaching."
"—'Tis not all."
Originally silent, Vritra swept her strong gaze across everyone in turn.
"Ye should realize by now, what the Kraken's child seeks is not family but mates. Persuasion is meaningless behavior."
"It's not meaningless! As long as I go, that child will surely—"
Jeanne immediately objected but she stopped talking once she saw that the girls with changing dragon marks did not voice their support.
Just as the tense silence was reaching breaking point, Shinomiya-sensei took a step forward.
"No matter what, we are out of time. The risk in approaching her to persuade her has increased. Hence, we will change tactics."
"—!"
Jeanne bit her lip with chagrin surfacing on her face.
"However, please do not misunderstand. I have not abandoned the possibility of persuasion. It's just that we will observe her while minimizing risk as much as possible."
"Huh..."

Jeanne reacted with surprise at what Shinomiya-sensei said.
"I will inform everyone of the plan's details while on the move. All participants in the operation, move out with me immediately!"
Shinomiya-sensei issued orders sternly.
"—Yes ma'am!"
Lisa and Firill head their heads high and puffed out their chests, answering loudly.
About to head to the scene, Shinomiya-sensei's figure exuded "strength" that I could feel from her days as the captain of the Counter-Dragon Squad which I had never witnessed—

Part 4

"...Onii-chan, everyone, do your best."
"Don't worry about Mitsuki, we'll protect her for sure."
Ren and Ariella saw us off as we departed. Likewise waiting at the lake side, Kili waved to us while her other hand held the vine that was binding Vritra.
"Even if NIFL attacks from the air, we will strike them all down. So Yuu, you have to protect me well."
"...Hmph."
As usual, Vritra turned her face away in displeasure.
"Then we're off."
Including me, the participants in the operation waved then took to the sky.
Tia with her fictional armament of red wings was in charge of transporting Jeanne and me, who did not have flying skills.
For transportation, Lisa was in charge of Iris while Firill had Shinomiya-sensei—Enveloping themselves in wind transmuted from their respective dark matter, they ascended in the air.
Within the blink of an eye, Ren and the others were no longer visible while the van on the side had become a small dot.
'—Well then, I will now explain the key points of the operation.'
The communicator transmitted Shinomiya-sensei's voice. I took my gaze off the lake that was growing distant.
'First of all, we will approach Kraken Zwei until visible range, to let her know of Jeanne Hortensia's presence. Judging from the battles against unmanned weaponry, the target's sensing range is quite broad and will surely detect her.'
—So Shinomiya-sensei had heard the earlier conversation.
We had not gone out of our way to explain to her, but she had switched to using "Jeanne" and "her" to refer to John, this showed that she had overheard our dialogue.
'Then we will first retreat temporarily and pulled back. After that, put down the three of us, Mononobe Yuu, Jeanne Hortensia and me, by the river on the west. The remaining members will standby at their combat positions as originally assigned.'
"Understood!"
Flying while holding my hand, Tia answered with full vigor.
Since Tia, Lisa and Firill were using combat goggles, their goggles should display the destination's necessary information.

'Hold on, Shinomiya-sensei. Going to the river on the west would greatly deviate from Kraken Zwei's direction of advance.'
Perhaps having confirmed the map, Lisa raised a question for Shinomiya-sensei.
'—I know, but if what Kraken Zwei seeks is family, she should change direction and come towards us. If she advances in search of mates instead of changing direction—Then we will exterminate her at the combat location.'
Shinomiya-sensei asserted gravely.
Jeanne and I were both being transported by Tia. I could hear Jeanne make a small gasp.
'In other words... We will persuade if it looks like there's hope for success. Perhaps that might be safer than suddenly appearing in front of Kraken Zwei.'
Firill agreed with Shinomiya-sensei's plan. Iris, transported by her, kept looking down at the view below the entire time. To cover up the scales appearing on her skin, she was still wearing my jacket.
'Yes, if she changes course, chances of successful persuasion will be much higher. However, I have considered the worst-case scenario, of course, and asked the members standing by at their assigned locations, distributed in our surroundings, to get ready to snipe. If the need arises, please attack from long range.'
Shinomiya-sensei explained the process to us but Iris raised a question.
'—If we follow that plan, will we be able to protect Mononobe and the rest of you in an emergency...? My Catastrophe doesn't work...'
'It's not that it doesn't work, but it gets blocked. Since Kraken Zwei is half D, then there should be a limit as to how much dark matter she can generate at a time. Mithril shields created through transmutation are not limitless.'
—Indeed. Kraken Zwei handled Catastrophe by generating a mithril shield to buy time before taking evasive action. That was probably evidence that her mithril generation was insufficient.
'Consequently, the other three apart from Iris Freyja will attack first. Once the target takes defensive action, Iris Freyja will then fire at weaknesses in her defense. Since Mononobe Mitsuki's antimatter is not available, there are no other effective measures. If the target doesn't change course, we will use this same attack sequence too.'
Shinomiya-sensei explained a battle plan that should have chances of succeeding, but Iris spoke pessimistically again:
'Then... If that plan fails too...'
'Then run away. No matter what our situation, none of you may approach Kraken Zwei. Keep your distance away from her to absolutely avoid turning into a dragon.'
Shinomiya-sensei asserted strictly.
'......'

Iris fell silent with mixed emotions. Surely, she was not only worrying about the worst-case scenario outlined, because the words 'turning into a dragon' had additional significance to Iris right now.
—Iris.
I wanted to tell her things but in front of others, I could not bring up Iris' change.
'I understand.'
'Roger.'
Lisa and Firill responded on the silent Iris' behalf.
"...If you are in danger... Tia doesn't want to run away alone."
However, Tia shook her head while transporting me.
"Don't worry, Tia. It's actually safer for us, the ones who are not marked. If anything happens, you must prioritize your own safety. I will find a solution using that time."
"Find a solution...?"
Tia showed surprise at what I said.
"Even if all plans fails, I will still put an end to things. Since Kraken Zwei is also a D—So long as the opponent is human, I won't lose for sure."
Not for Tia alone, I was also declaring clearly for Iris to hear on the channel as well.
'Mononobe...'
Transported by Firill, Iris cast her gaze towards me.
As for Jeanne, who did not wish for battle, she looked down with a sad expression.
"However, our first important task is to succeed in persuasion. Let's pray right now that it won't turn into a battle."
To cheer Jeanne up, I deliberately added in a cheerful tone of voice.
'—Mononobe Yuu is right. Right now, the first important task of the plan is to persuade and win over the target. If we display an intention to fight from the very start, she will be wary too. Once we pass the next hill, the target should enter our view. Please prepare yourselves.'
Pointing to a slightly higher hill ahead, Shinomiya-sensei urged everyone to prepare themselves mentally.
To avoid getting ambushed by Kraken Zwei, we were flying at low altitude, following the hill's slope to gradually rise in elevation.
Soon after—The target came into view.
The scenery broadened all at once after we passed the hill. One object in the scenery was an exceptionally large silver mass, dominating the ground with overwhelming presence.
"—!?"
The extent of its massive size made one gasp. Perhaps because she was still expanding during our journey here, her length had clearly exceeded fifteen meters.
Covered by a silver curtain woven by multiple layers of mithril threads, her real body was not visible. The slowly quivering exterior was reminiscent of a

jellyfish drifting in the ocean. The tiny silver threads fluttering at the edge of her body glimmered from the rays of the sun that was starting to set.
At this moment, I felt all the hairs on my body stand on end.
—We were seen.
Feeling this signal through my skin, I instantly yelled.
"That's enough! Everybody pull back quickly!"
'Stop advancing! Turn around and retreat!'
Almost at the same time, Shinomiya-sensei issued orders.
"G-Got it!"
Kraken Zwei's appearance had stunned Tia. She came back to her senses and answered.
Jeanne stared intently at Kraken Zwei, gradually receding away, then took a deep breath.
"I am here! You don't have to be afraid on your own anymore! Come with me!"
Jeanne yelled with all her strength.
After crossing the hill and Kraken Zwei went out of sight, she closed her eyes as though in prayer.
"Please... You must remember me."
Immediately, an explosion occurred at the hill serving as cover.
"What—"
No, more accurately, the hill was leveled. A thick length of silver ribbon had uprooted the entire hill, scattering trees and soil.
'Accelerate! The target is gaining on us!'
Shinomiya-sensei called out urgently.
On the other side of the cloud of rising dust and sand, countless glimmering silver strands could be glimpsed.
Was she chasing after Jeanne? Or seeking mates? At the current stage, it was still unclear.
Confirming this question was next.
'I am about to fly at full speed. Are you okay, Tia-san?'
Lisa asked Tia who was transporting Jeanne and me.
"Yes, no problem!"
'Well then, time to accelerate!'
Our flying speed increased all at once, the scenery was left behind in the blink of an eye.
Then according to the plan as discussed earlier, we first landed at the bank of the river out west.
The river itself was quite narrow but the shore was quite wide with excellent visibility.
"—According to the plan, we will wait here for Kraken Zwei. If she does not come this way... We will deem the target as a dragon, as mentioned just now, and exterminate it."
Shinomiya-sensei issued strict orders to the four girls in the attack team.
"Affirmative."

"—Yes."
"Understood."
Lisa, Firill and Tia answered with tense expressions.
Iris nodded silently in response then turned her gaze at me.
"Mononobe..."
"Don't worry, no matter what happens, I—"
I smiled, trying to comfort Iris who seemed quite worried—but she shook her head.
"No, Mononobe, it's the opposite this time."
"Huh?"
With eyes filled with strong determination, Iris stared at me in my surprise.
"No matter what happens, I will protect you. I won't let you die no matter what, Mononobe."
"Iris...?"
I sensed some kind of dangerous signal from Iris' expression and reached towards her.
"So, Mononobe, don't be reckless, okay?"
Then Iris smiled sweetly—and as though evading my hand—and went towards Lisa and the others with a turn of of her body.
Together, Shinomiya-sensei, Jeanne and I watched them fly towards the sky.
"The only thing left is to wait."
Shinomiya-sensei watched the screen of her portable terminal while speaking nervously. She was probably looking at transmitted information to ascertain Kraken Zwei's location.
We were at the wide open riverside, so visibility was excellent, but Kraken Zwei had yet to appear.
However, faint rumbling of the ground could be heard from afar. Perhaps sensing a calamity, flocks of birds were flying out of the forest, calling sharply while circling nonstop in the air above.
"Please... Come over."
Jeanne stared at the direction of the rumbling and clenched her fist tightly.
"—Hey Jeanne."
"Eh?"
I called her original name but she looked at me in surprise.
"Oh, you prefer John instead?"
"N-No, either is fine..."
Jeanne blushed slightly and waved her hands frantically in denial.
"Okay—Jeanne, why are you so biased in favor of Kraken Zwei?"
I asked about what had intrigued me the whole time.
"I mentioned earlier... because I know she is human—"
"—I get a sense that you've grown fond of her more or less, but considering you sacrificed yourself to block Sleipnir's attack for her and seeing you look so anxious right now... I really don't think that's the only reason."

Risking one's life to protect someone, that was easier said than done. Were it not for someone more precious than oneself, one would definitely falter at a critical moment.
The reason why I was not afraid to pay any price in my battles so far was because I did it for those I held dear.
"...Indeed, I might be a bit too biased, but no matter what, I can't leave her alone."
Jeanne paused here and stared straight into my eyes.
"My wish is for me to become her good fortune."
"Good fortune?"
Not knowing what she was talking about, I frowned and asked.
"—I started out as a war orphan and only survived to this day thanks to many fortunate encounters. I am truly grateful from the bottom of my heart to every instance of that good fortune. That is why when I myself becomes someone's good fortune.. I don't want to betray this fortune."
Hearing Jeanne's words, filled with determination, I nodded in agreement.
"I see—I get it now."
Having obtained the answer to my question, I could now pray with the same feelings as Jeanne, praying that Kraken Zwei would come towards us to seek her own good fortune.
"Jeanne Hortensia."
Shinomiya-sensei took her gaze off the portable terminal and looked in Jeanne's direction.
"...?"
Jeanne looked at her questioningly. Immediately, Shinomiya-sensei bowed her head deeply.
"—Thank you."
She was most likely speaking as Shinomiya Miyako's elder sister.
Shinomiya-sensei wanted to thank Jeanne for wanting to provide her sister's child with good fortune.
If Mitsuki were here, she would probably have done the same thing.
Then at this moment, I heard faint static from the communicator on my ear —followed by Lisa's voice.
'This is Lisa Highwalker. Visual confirmation of Kraken Zwei from the air above my standby position. She has changed course towards you!'
"—!"
Jeanne and Shinomiya-sensei looked at each other with optimism.
However, Shinomiya-sensei soon tensed her expression and issued orders to Lisa and the others.
"After waiting for Kraken Zwei to move, the attack team will spread out in four directions from us, to standby at suitable sniping positions. If the target does not yield to our persuasion, commence the attack immediately."
'Understood.'
After Lisa answered, Tia, Firill and Iris also responded, then the exchange was over.

The persistent rumbling of the ground grew louder and louder.
"She's here—"
Hearing Shinomiya-sensei say that, Jeanne and I nodded in response.
In addition to the ground's rumbling, I could also hear the sound of trees snapping.
Boom—Accompanying this thunderous crash, trees and soil flew up into the air. The silver ribbon moved at high speed, reflecting sunlight to shine.
Dust was blown by a strong wind. After merely a moment's blinking, the scenery had changed completely.
The vast forest following the river had been swept clear, turning into an empty plain. Towering there was a gigantic silver-white body.
Covered by a multi-layered silver curtain, the body kept shaking as countless silver strands fluttered in the air.
"...!"
The pressure exerted by her presence was causing my body to stiffen. I almost created my fictional armament on reflex, but suppressed the urge through rationality.
Our current undertaking was persuasion. It was imperative to avoid movements that would cause her to take hostile action.
"Stop! I am here!"
Jeanne took a step forward and called loudly to her. Perhaps understanding her speech, Kraken Zwei stopped advancing, halting her movements completely.
—Judging from the situation, will it work?
'Firill Crest reporting. Everyone is in position now.'
From the communicator, I heard that all members prepared to snipe in the event of failure had reached their positions.
"Acknowledged. Remain on standby until the situation changes."
Shinomiya-sensei answered quietly and focused her attention on Jeanne and Kraken Zwei who were facing each other across the river.
The whole time, I could feel a gaze that gave me goosebumps. Kraken Zwei was undoubtedly looking in this direction.
"—You must be lonely all by yourself. But you can rest assured now. Don't hide in that big shell. Come out and let me see you."
Jeanne spread her arms and persuaded gently.
Vibrations resembling a ripple appeared on Kraken Zwei's silver curtain, then opened smoothly in front of her body.
Due to a decrease in obstructions, I could feel Kraken Zwei's gaze stabbing my skin more strongly. A chill ran along my spine.
—What was this?
Jeanne's call seemed to be having an effect. Things were going according to plan, but I still felt an indescribable sense of unease.
From the interior of the obstruction woven from silver strands came a presence that pricked my skin.
—Did Jeanne and Shinomiya-sensei feel nothing?

I was the only one whose body was frozen.
Then this must be something targeting only me.
After unraveling multiple layers of obstruction, the true body of the young girl emerged. Half of her face was hidden by long hair, the single exposed eye glowed purple.
"—!"
The instant I made eye contact with the girl, my premonition turned into certainty.
She was not looking at Jeanne!
"Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"
The girl roared, staring straight at me.
I instantly felt pain on the back of my left hand where my dragon mark was located.
As though responding to this pain, purple light erupted from Kraken Zwei's forehead. Blowing by the swirling wind, the hair over the girl's forehead floated up, revealing the pattern beneath.
—That was a dragon mark!
"H-Hey, what is with you!?"
Jeanne frantically called the girl but Kraken Zwei ignored her, only staring at me.
The more the light given off from the girl's glowing dragon mark intensified, the more my dragon mark hurt.
In addition, something resembling emotions flowed in.
The intent to steal. A pulsation of emotions wanting to force submission and plunder.
This girl—wanted to mark me as hers!?
Invaded by an intense foreign body sensation and and disgust, I figured out the girl's goal.
Kraken Zwei was chasing me, not Jeanne. Most likely, she had approached here to engrave proof of her mark on me, whose dragon mark had not changed color at all.
Simultaneous with certainty, my anger erupted in a torrent.
In addition to Kili, Mitsuki and the others, you intend to take me too?
The pain of loss, the suffering of the plundered, I had experienced it countless times already. I had hurt others as a result of losing precious things.
Hence, I shall not allow anyone to take anything from me ever again!
"—How could I let myself be taken by you!!"
I swung my arm with furious emotions. In that very instant, the pain in my dragon mark vanished.
It felt as though something had been severed. Kraken Zwei's body trembled slightly—The nature of her feelings towards me changed.
"Gururururururururu—!"
Obvious hostility surged in the girl's gaze as she growled.
Clang—

A sharp and ear-splitting metallic noise resounded all around.
It was the sound of friction between silver threads fluttering in the air and getting entangled together.
"I beg you! Please calm down!"
Jeanne desperately tried to soothe her but the girl remained unmoved.
"Jeanne, it's no good! She's already—"
I understood instinctively that the moment I refused to be her mate, Kraken Zwei had recognized me as an enemy that must be eliminated.
As vexing as it was, what Vritra had said now seemed to be the truth. Right now, Kraken Zwei sought mates rather than family.
"Nothing of that sort! If I call to her more, surely she will—"
However, Jeanne shook her head in disagreement.
"Please! Listen to us!"
Shinomiya-sensei stepped forward and joined in to call her. Confronted with the girl whose face resembled her younger sister's, Shinomiya-sensei had apparently lost her usual calm.
"—!"
I concluded that they were going to get caught up in the attack, so I broke into a sprint.
I did not know if it was fortunate or unfortunate, but Kraken Zwei did not register Jeanne and Shinomiya-sensei in her vision at all. The hostility she exuded was entirely directed at me.
I ran along the river, distancing myself from Jeanne and Shinomiya-sensei.
—Fictional armament, Siegfried.
When I formed my fictional armament of an ornamental gun, Kraken Zwei also got ready to attack.
Countless spears woven from silver threads were aiming straight at me. The reason why she did not use antimatter was probably because the distance was too close, so there was a risk of getting caught in it herself.
In that case, getting too far away would be to my disadvantage too. Since running away had problems too, my only choice was to approach and kill her.
—Sorry, Jeanne and Shinomiya-sensei.
Deeming Kraken Zwei an enemy, I apologized to the two of them who had not lost hope yet.
Countless silver spears fired together.
"Air Bullet!"
I shot a bullet of compressed air underfoot and used the reaction force to swiftly get away from my position. Seeing my original location pierced by silver spears, I began to take precautions against the next attack.
Shining silver trails appeared in the surroundings.
Kraken Zwei was spreading her hair, trying to surround me.
No place to run—
"Antigravity!"

I used up the remaining dark matter that sustained the fictional armament's shape, converting it entirely into antigravitational matter. Accompanied by a white glow, the repulsive field pushed away the silver cage that was approaching from all sides.
"!"
Seizing a gap that opened up between the silver threads, I escaped the encirclement.
"Shinomiya-sensei! Please give Lisa and the others the order to attack!"
I regrouped while yelling.
Kraken Zwei no longer treated Jeanne as family. Since she was attacking like this, she was an opponent that must be treated as a dragon.
Shinomiya-sensei could not possibly not know this, but she did not issue orders over the communicator. Instead, she took unexpected action.
"What..."
Shinomiya-sensei ran towards me.
Gritting her teeth, she looked like she was holding back her tears.
Kraken Zwei aimed at me again with her silver spears. I created my fictional armament again but just before I was about to take evasive action—
Shinomiya-sensei inserted herself between us and spread her arms.
"If you can understand human speech—if you can hear my voice—even if just a little bit, please listen to me!"
With her back to me, Shinomiya-sensei faced Kraken Zwei and yelled loudly. She was trying so desperately, it was like a plea or a prayer.
"I hope you will live as a human! As Miyako's—as my little sister's daughter!"
As Shinomiya Miyako's older sister rather than Midgard's commander, she was trying her hardest to persuade the girl.
But the answer turned out to be a rain of silver.
Woven from silver threads, sharp spears rained down on us.
"Tsk—Antigravity!"
My original plan was to use wind pressure to escape at high speed as before, but at the last moment, I switched to defending with a repulsive field.
Engulfed by white light, the silver spears slowed down and stopped in the air.
Clang—
However, a strange sound rang out. Stopped in the air, the silver spears unraveled and melded together to form a spiral spearhead resembling a drill.
The spearhead resisted the repulsive field, spinning to push forward by force.
"Shinomiya-sensei! It's no good, so please hurry and give orders to attack!"
Seeing that this would not hold for long, I called to Shinomiya-sensei.
"Please… Mononobe Yuu, one last time."
However, Shinomiya-sensei said strongly without looking back.

Approaching the spearhead fearlessly, she only looked at Kraken Zwei—
"But—"
With her back to the desperately anxious me, Shinomiya-sensei continued to plead to her.
"Kraken Zwei... Please remember! Remember Jeanne Hortensia whom you desired as family! She hopes for your happiness from the bottom of her heart!"
Facing the silver-haired girl who controlled mithril, Shinomiya-sensei delivered words filled with intense thoughts and feelings.
"And I too—wish for your happiness more than anyone!!"
"Gahhhhhhhh!!"
However, Kraken Zwei answered with an angry roar.
The mithril hair pulsed, concentrating its power at a point—The silver drill penetrated the white repulsive field in one go.
"You are not an unwanted disaster. You are Shinomiya Miyako's daughter—A human!!"
But even so, Shinomiya-sensei refused to back down.
"Everyone hurry and attack!"
I believed the limit was reached so I called to everyone over the communicator.
'B-But Shinomiya-sensei has not given the order—'
Lisa's troubled voice responded.
"...!"
Deciding there was no time to answer, I rushed out from behind Shinomiya-sensei.
Kraken Zwei's target was me. So long as Shinomiya-sensei remained in front, she would be caught in the crossfire.
At this moment, the spiral spearhead finally broke through the repulsive field by force.
Slightly faster than I expected. No—I had judged too late.
Seeing the spearhead extend with frightening speed, I realized it was too late to evade.
However, impending death was blocked by a silhouette that had moved in from the side.
I was pushed back with a thud.
"Cough—"
What I heard was a muffled cry of pain.
I looked up to see Shinomiya-sensei's face, coughing blood.
"Sorry for asking you to go along... with my willfulness..."
Shinomiya-sensei coughed while apologizing to me.
I shifted my gaze lower, only to see the thick silver spear skewering her body—
"What..."
Realizing Shinomiya-sensei had protected me, I gasped. And under those circumstances, she still turned around to face Kraken Zwei.

"Even if these words cannot reach you right now... It is fine. However... at least please remember... that someone once wished for your happiness here..."
Spitting a large mouthful of blood, Shinomiya-sensei collapsed.
"—Please, Lisa! Shoooooooot!!"
My mind went blank and I cried out with all my strength.
'—V-Very well!'
A yellow flash ripped through the sky. At the same time, the approaching mithril hair was pulled back to the body.
The flash of light clashed with the shield woven from silver threads, giving off blinding light.
'Tia, we are joining in.'
'Got it!'
Slightly later, Firill and Tia joined in the attack. Projectiles of fire approached from the right while lightning attacked Kraken Zwei from the left. Since her mithril hair was being used to block Lisa's attack, she could not use her hair. However, black particles of dark matter appeared in Kraken Zwei's surroundings to create silver walls.
Fire and lightning was deflected, shaking the air with thunderous noise. Despite the giant explosion—That sort of attack did not reach the main body.
Still, that was within expectations. Iris should now be looking for a chance to attack. But before everything else, the most important thing was—
"Shinomiya-sensei!"
I picked up the collapsed Shinomiya-sensei in my arms and called her name. While switching to defense, Kraken Zwei had already pulled out the silver spear that had skewered her body.
However, the wound was too large. With such a massive hole opened in the center of the body, surely many important organs must have been gouged out. The warm blood flowing from her body dyed my hands red all over.
Having seen countless casualties on battlefields in the past, I understood...
She was beyond saving.

"C-Cough... C-Cough... Sor, ry—"
Shinomiya-sensei looked at me with hazy eyes, her voice apologizing to me in fragments.
"Why—"
Why did you do that—I stopped myself from finishing this question. Because there was no need to ask. She was simply doing everything she could as Shinomiya Miyako's elder sister. And her apology just now was her apologizing for not fulfilling her role as the commander—
"Looks like I... am not, strong enough—to, kill my little sister twice."
Shinomiya-sensei's voice continued hoarsely, her gaze directed towards Kraken Zwei.
Attacked from three directions, the girl hid herself between her mithril hair and shields.
"No—I think that as a human, Shinomiya-sensei, you are stronger than anyone."
I held back from sobbing and turned my head to the side, because I believed that in refusing to give up hope, persisting in persuasion, Shinomiya-sensei's actions were definitely not weak.
"—Ho, Mononobe Yuu... You are—so nice."
With a slight smile on her lips, she closed her eyes then forgot to breathe, sinking into deep slumber.
"...!"
I bit my lip hard then placed Shinomiya-sensei's gradually cooling body on the river shore.
I saw Jeanne fall down, sitting on the ground after standing in the distance in shock.
'Mononobe! Did something happen to Shinomiya-sensei!?'
I heard Iris over the communicator.
"—She was hit by Kraken Zwei."
I managed to force out these words in reply.
'H-Hit? Is she injured somewhere—'
"A fatal wound, she's already... stopped breathing."
'!?'
Not just Iris, but everyone else was speechless. I could sense it over the communicator.
'No, way...'
Firill murmured hoarsely.
'Right now... We must focus our attacks! Do not let up our offense!'
However, Lisa yelled resolutely, supporting everyone's hearts nearing collapse.
'...G-Got it.'
Despite showing wavering in her heart, Tia still responded. The attacks from three directions did not halt, persisting nonstop.
'Ah... Ahhh...'

I heard Iris sobbing faintly but her crying gradually grew louder, finally turning into mournful wailing.
'Oooh... Ooooooooooh!'
Her sorrowful crying felt like knife in my heart.
"Sorry, I failed to protect Sensei."
The only way I could respond was apologize.
"Oooooh... Ahhh... Ahhhhhhhhh!!"
Anger was building up amidst sorrow.
Laments spontaneously turned into a howl of intense emotion.
'AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!'
The screaming ended, following by the sound of inhalation.
Then accompanied by blinding crimson light—
Iris released her burning feelings.
'O catastrophe—Actualiiiize!!
Red light shone from afar.
It was a flash of light that stole time, bringing destruction to all creation.
Due to Lisa, Firill and Tia's attacks, Kraken Zwei's defense had become thin at one location. Aiming at that spot, Iris' Catastrophe pierced the atmosphere to attack.
However, Kraken Zwei noticed a moment earlier and generated a shield in that direction.
Whether Iris could break through would depend on the amount of dark matter Kraken Zwei could generate each time.
A gigantic flood of red light smashed against the mithril shield.
Iris' Catastrophe looked even more powerful than before. The pillar of light, which seemed like it was about to devour the gigantic Kraken Zwei, rivaled even Basilisk's trump card, the "Third Eye."
This was the power of Iris, who was now becoming close to a dragon—
'Oooh... Ahhhhhhhh!!'
With screaming mixed with crying, Iris continued to fire the flash of red light.
The thick shield of mithril between them was gradually weathered away before our eyes.
With one direct hit, Kraken Zwei would probably turn into dust and vanish.
But... was this ending really appropriate?
Until the very end, Shinomiya-sensei had prayed for Kraken Zwei's happiness. Recalling the plea she had risked her life to deliver, I could not help but feel lost.
My heart could not make a decision. A tide of emotions was whispering in my ear—Should I carry on Shinomiya-sensei's last wish?
"Gahhhhhhhhhhh!"
Kraken Zwei roared amidst the light.
Boom—
With a thunderous crash, the gigantic silver body flew rapidly into the air.
'What!?'

I heard Lisa's surprised voice over the communicator.
—Did she judge that the shield was not going to hold and thus took evasive action?
However, this was no ordinary leap. The enormous silver body was wrapped in a ball shape with a large amount of leaves and twigs that had been swept up.
She had probably transmuted dark matter into air, thereby controlling wind. It was the same way as how Ds flew. Perhaps she had learned it by watching us.
Kraken Zwei ascended while rotating sideways, firing purple light in four directions.
"!? That's antimatter! Hurry and run, everyone!!"
I came back to my senses from my daze and yelled.
The antimatter flying at Iris was erased by Catastrophe, but the remaining three shots exploded in three separate directions.
Accompanied by flashes of blinding light, thunderous noise shook the atmosphere.
"Lisa, Firill, Tia!"
I called out over the communicator but only got static as a response.
They were capable of flying into the air and should have had enough time to react. It was possible that they were simply unable to answer due to interference from the explosion, or—
The worst-case scenario, which I did not want to touch upon, flashed in my mind.
'Damn youuuuuuuuuuu—!'
Iris' voice hammered my ear drum.
Chasing after the humongous body that had escaped to the air, the red light from the ground ripped through the air towards the top of the sky.
Right now, the only things protecting Kraken Zwei was a barrier of air and a silver curtain woven from mithril hair.
The air barrier was blown away in an instant as blinding red light engulfed the gigantic silver body.
While her vector turned downwards, Kraken Zwei's body gradually shrunk.
But at the same time, the red light suddenly began to grow faint as well.
'...No way—I was clearly so close...'
I heard Iris' pained voice. Catastrophe's output had apparently reached a limit.
'C-Clearly... I must do this—'
Iris cried loudly but the red light continued to diminish mercilessly.
Witnessing this scene, my hesitation vanished.
—Shinomiya-sensei, I'm sorry. I... have to protect Iris and the others.
I was unable to carry on her last wish because murder was the only thing I could do.
"Don't worry, Iris."
I said to the lamenting Iris.

Swallowed by feelings of anger, sorrow and regret, I sank into the depths of my consciousness.
In order to hunt the Kraken Zwei hiding behind a silver curtain—to hunt a human—I once again became one with "Fafnir."
"Leave the rest to me."
Announcing strongly, I ran towards where Kraken Zwei was expected to land.
When the red light stopped completely, a small mass wrapped in silver threads was exposed. Sure enough, Iris' firepower was slightly insufficient, but Kraken Zwei had shrunk to around three meters, similar to during our first confrontation.
Thus, the silver mass fell in the forest some distance from the river side.
With a massive crash, the ground shook slightly with dust and soil flying up.
After crossing the shallow river, I rushed into the forest where Kraken Zwei had crashed.
"—Captain! Please wait!"
I heard Jeanne's voice faintly from afar. She definitely not given up.
Precisely because of that, I must not stop. I could not allow Jeanne to repeat Shinomiya-sensei's tragedy.
Dim conditions in the forest combined with the dust cloud compromised visibility. However, Fafnir's sense of smell in search of prey would not be dulled by this level of interference.
I definitely caught it, the presence of the girl slowly getting up where she had crashed. Then there was the sharp killing intent approaching me.
—Whoosh!
Accompanied by the sound of slicing wind, silver strands attacked.
Anti-materiel armor—Damascus 09P!
I deployed multiple palm-sized shields along the silver strands' trajectories.
Although they could not completely block the threads that were made of mithril, they could deflect trajectories slightly and reduce their speed.
What this produced was a tiny window of opportunity. I lowered my stance and rushed through that opening.
Passing through the cloud of dust, my field of view instantly opened up.
In front of me was—A young girl with swaying silver hair.
Standing in a depression in the ground, her purple eye shot straight at me.
Death's chilling presence crept up my spine as I saw the girl's eye release the glow of antimatter.
"—!"
I extended my hand to block as though in response.
"Gahhhhhhh!!"
Kraken Zwei roared and released antimatter, not afraid of getting caught up in it.
I generated dark matter at the same time, transmuting antigravitational matter without using a fictional armament!

The strong repulsive field, capable of warping space itself, was deployed with a white glow—The antimatter projectile was deflected upwards. Completing its job, the antigravitational matter shattered and dissipated, leaving white light.
I closed in even further.
Approaching—A distance within the reach of Fafnir's fangs.
The girl widened her eyes slightly, looking up at me from close range.
Her young, adorable and slender face was quite similar to Shinomiya-sensei—But I did not hesitate.
She was seeking mates, not Jeanne. She had let slip of happiness on her own accord despite how hard it was to come by.
And most important of all... She had killed Shinomiya-sensei!
"Ahhhhhhhhhh!!"
The reverse flow of anger and sorrow sinking in my heart was ejected as a yell from my mouth.
Kraken Zwei's body was wrapped in mithril hair to shield her vitals.
Naturally, her head was protected by hair too. Landing a single lethal strike would be extremely difficult.
However—methods to kill her naturally surfaced in my mind.
Fafnir told me the ways.
I generated dark matter in both hands at the same time, transmuting them into high-density antigravitational matter, using the two repulsive fields to create a spatial discontinuity!
In the past, "White" Leviathan had used multiple repulsive fields to produce spatial discontinuities to amputate parts of its body.
I should be able to accomplish something similar, even if just on a small scale.
In the gap between the repulsive fields shining with pure white light—a pitch-black crack arose.
A gap of warped space.
—Gravity Grave.
I fired the black blade born out of white light!
The girl's body was devoured by the white radiance and black discontinuity.
No matter how sturdy the outer shell providing protection, the spatial discontinuity could twist everything caught inside.
A living body could not possibly withstand that level of distortion.
"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"
Screaming a death cry, Kraken Zwei was blown away backwards.
The trees ahead were also caught in the spatial distortion phenomenon, twisting and breaking like paper.
Kraken Zwei was thrown into the depths of the forest, out of sight.
"—Huff... Huff..."
I only remembered to breathe again after the girl vanished from my view.
I probably... killed her. The hit definitely felt concrete.

Bitter emotions were spreading in my heart. The feeling after the conclusion—It was awful. Although I had avenged Shinomiya-sensei, there was no sense of accomplishment at all.
It approached the worst-case scenario closely.
Not only losing Shinomiya-sensei but also failing to save Shinomiya Miyako's daughter.
"Damn it..."
I clenched my fist and cursed in regret.
However, at this moment, there was a silver flash from the depths of the forest.
"—Huh?"
A strong impact struck my body. While my view was spinning, silver threads came into view.
Then a wave of intense pain came from my body's left half.
Just as I was in so much pain that I was about to scream, more impacts attacked.
This time it was my back and the back of my head. The pain and impact turned my view black. Without knowing what was happening, I screamed for real this time.
"Ugh... Ahhhhhhhhh!?"
Why did it hurt so much? Most likely, my ribs were broken. My back and the back of my head might be bleeding. I felt a warm and viscous flow running down my skin.
Then I had an unusual feeling.
How odd, if Fafnir was awakened, I was supposed to be able to sever the sensation of pain through willpower.
But no matter how I tried, the pain did not go away.
Rustle—Rustle—
I heard faint footsteps.
Using my blurred vision, I looked ahead.
I had most likely crashed into a tree, putting my body in a sitting posture right now. The height of my gaze was quite low.
Passing through the dim forest—The girl, whom I should have killed already, emerged.
With her hair woven into silver ribbons in spiral form, the Kraken's child directed her purple gaze at me.
Surfacing on her face was a bestial expression—savage anger and killing intent.
Seeing that kind of expression, I understood.
Not choosing the good fortune that was Jeanne, abandoning the closest kin that was Shinomiya-sensei, the girl had forsaken her human identity.
That appearance and way of living made her far more suitable to the title of dragon than the current Vritra.
No wonder... I had failed to kill her.
Leaning against the tree, I muttered bitterly in my heart.

—Major Loki, how rare for your judgment to be mistaken. It doesn't seem like... I am entitled to make the choice anymore.
Looking up at the tiny monster that was approaching, I realized I had lost.
I was only capable of killing humans.
The fangs of Fafnir could not reach a being that was not human.

Chapter 4 - Neun of Blue-Nine

Part 1

Iris Freyja already understood. Because it was about herself, she understood what had caused her own transformation.
It was—whenever she sought power. Whenever she wanted to acquire and use stronger power than before.
Long ago, she already had a feeling that using Catastrophe would speed up the changes in her body.
However, for the sake of protecting her comrades—protecting those dear to her—to avenge her teacher, she made full use of the power she had inherited from Basilisk.
"Catastrophe—Actualiiiiiize!!"
Even without using the zoom function of her goggles, she could still see Kraken Zwei's gigantic body, not simply because of the target's large size but also due to the fact that her own vision had improved.
The red flash of light struck as intended, weathering away the shield of mithril.
Also, she was aware that the more she used Catastrophe, the more the hardened parts of her skin—the areas covered by red scales—would spread.
It felt so scary, so repulsive.
But her attack must not stop.
—Because this is the one thing I can do!!
She used her total power, striking down Kraken Zwei, which had escaped into the air, to crash on the ground.
But that was already her limit. The red glow of time-stealing light vanished from her hand.
"...!"
Almost there, just a tiny bit more. She shed tears of chagrin.
'Don't worry, Iris.'
His gentle voice spoke from the communicator.
"Mononobe...?"
'The rest—leave it all to me.'
Leaving these words behind, he headed , but—
'Urgh... Ahhhhhhhhhh!?'
After a while, what she heard was a mournful cry that made her want to cover up her ears. It was his scream.
"Mononobe!? What happened? Mononbe, answer me!!"

Although she cried out desperately, there was no response. Was the communicator broken? Or he did not have the leisure to answer?

But all she knew was that someone important—someone whose existence was more important than anything—was in a crisis.

Iris Freyja's sniping location was a cliff with excellent visibility where Firill had transported her. It was quite far away from the location where *he* and Kraken Zwei were fighting.

Unable to fly, it was impossible for her to head to the rescue immediately.

Indeed—Precisely because it was impossible, she wished for new power.

—Even though she knew clearly that it would turn herself into something further from human.

Part 2

—Unable to move.
Using my hazy vision, I looked up at the gradually approaching Kraken Zwei.
Paralyzed by damage and pain, my body could not respond to my will smoothly. But even if I could move, escaping would still be impossible.
"Everyone... Hurry and run... The farther the better."
I called to them over the communicator.
But all I could hear was static. Lisa and the others had not responded after getting attacked by antimatter. Iris did not answer either. The earlier impact seemed to have broken the microphone, so I did not know if my voice was getting through.
Lisa, Firill, Tia and Iris, the four of them had been positioned far away in the area to snipe. Shinomiya-sensei had given instructions for us to flee if the operation failed. I could only hope that the girls would follow instructions if they were safe and sound.
What I wished to see least of all was everyone turning into a dragon.
Standing as the second-generation hybrid dragon, the girl spread ribbons woven from her silver hair towards her surroundings, staring at me with her purple eyes.
Whether using antimatter or a mere hair from her head, killing me would be effortless, but she did not do that. I wondered why then realized—
The girl was looking at my left hand, not my face. The location of my dragon mark.
Perhaps she was puzzled about why she could not mark me. Perhaps she wanted to confirm the reason?
—Actually, I'd like someone to tell me too.
I made a slight smile of wryness.
But that look apparently angered her. Kraken Zwei narrowed her eyes and shaped her silver ribbons into spears.
I silently understood that she wanted to deliver the fatal blow to me. I had no means of resisting. Intense pain was suppressing my thoughts. Trying to concentrate in order to perform transmutation was beyond me.
"Stop it!!"
However, just as she was about to unleash her rising killing intent, Jeanne pushed aside bushes and rushed over.

Her blonde hair was messy and her face was pale. Seeing her like that, my heart was filled with intense anxiety.
Rushing in under such circumstances would be committing suicide. At this rate, Jeanne was going to follow in Shinomiya-sensei's footsteps—
"Don't come over..."
I desperately forced out a voice, but she did not retreat. Instead, she raised the AT Nergal I had given her earlier and said:
"You... stop it! Please remember me!!"
"Gururu!"
However, Kraken Zwei simply growled and generated black particles of dark matter in the surroundings.
"What—"
A sudden gush of raging wind blew Jeanne into the forest. Like when she had flew into the sky, Kraken Zwei must have created a large amount of air.
However, a weak flash of light came from the dim forest. The silver ribbons protecting the girl moved at the same time.
Zzzzt!
The flash of electricity exploded in front of the girl. Jeanne had most likely sniped using AT Nergal, but Kraken Zwei had used her mithril hair to block, preventing the shot from hitting her.
"Even if you forgot me, I beg you... Please think about your own happiness! The way you are right now... Are you happy!?"
Jeanne's voice came from the forest.
"Gahhhh!!"
However, the girl summoned dark matter again. Instead of transmuting it into wind this time, she made flames and shot them out.
Immediately, a explosion was heard with rumbling along the ground. Then Jeanne's voice vanished completely.
"Damn, it..."
I could not do anything. I gnashed my teeth in chagrin at my uselessness.
Glaring at Kraken Zwei who had looked back, I generated dark matter, but my hazy consciousness could not control properly and the dark matter turned into bubbles, dissipating in the air.
I had no recourse. My body could not move. Even my mind could not muster resistance towards her.
Confronted with me, her prey, the girl smiled savagely like a beast.
"———"
At this moment, I heard a faint voice. It was someone calling out from extremely far away.
I thought it was Jeanne, but no, the direction was off.
I shifted my gaze upwards. At the same time, Kraken Zwei also looked up at the sky.
"————Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

Slicing out a red trail, something fell down. By the time I realized it was a very familiar girl to me—Iris Freyja—she was already using her downward momentum to swing a punch!
CLANG—
A sharp metallic noise resounded all around. Iris' fist was blocked by ribbons woven from mithril hair.
"Get away from Mononobe—Far away——!"
However, Iris' punch continued all the way until her arm straightened, sending Kraken Zwei flying together with her shield.
Flying away in a spiral, the girl smashed into a big tree violently.
However, my gaze did not leave Iris who had landed before me.
"Huff... Huff..."
Iris breathed heavily in disarray. Her clothing had holes all over. The jacket I was lending to her was all tattered. She must have been through quite a lot of hardship to travel here.
On Iris' exposed skin, hard red scales could be seen all over the place, having spread much wider than before. In particular, her entire right arm below the elbow was completely covered by scales.
If these scales were the same as Basilisk's, they would be made of diamond. However, the scales on the right fist, which she had used to punch Kraken Zwei, had shattered and was dripping blood.
"Iris...?"
I called her name hoarsely. Iris immediately turned her head to look at me. Her eyes were crimson like rubies.
"Don't worry, Mononobe."
She could not have failed to notice her changes, but even so, Iris still smiled at me. The purple glow of the dragon mark on her flank had disappeared completely, proving that she was much closer to a dragon now.
"I said it before, right? No matter what happens, I'll protect you. I absolutely won't let you die, Mononobe, so—"
Iris turned her gaze to Kraken Zwei.
The girl was completely unharmed despite getting punched far away. The impact was probably absorbed entirely by the shield woven from hair.
"I will do everything as long as it's in my power. Just like what you did for me, Mononobe!"
A flash of purple light. Kraken Zwei was firing antimatter.
However, this strongest spear, capable of mutual annihilation with all matter, disappeared in red light.
I did not know what Iris had done because she had her back to me.
However, I saw her eyes glowing red when she looked at me again—Then I understood.
She was releasing Catastrophe directly from her eyes, just like Basilisk.
Everything in her view was weathered into dust, but Kraken Zwei had apparently escaped the line of fire at the last moment. She was now glaring at us from a spot ten-odd meters away.

However, her hair had become even shorter than before, probably erased due to Catastrophe's weathering.
"Here I go."
Iris smiled dreamily and kicked the ground.
"Iri—"
I felt an uneasiness in my heart. Just as I called to stop her, Iris had already started a melee brawl with Kraken Zwei. Her footspeed far surpassed that of normal humans, moving so fast that the naked eye failed to capture the process.
Iris' gradually rising physical abilities had already surpassed the human realm entirely.
"Gahhhhhhhhhhhh!"
Kraken Zwei roared and swung a spear made from the gathering of silver hair, but Iris slipped through an opening in the attack with astounding movements, circling over to the girl's right where her defense was weak.
"Catastrophe!!"
Iris fired time-stealing red light from her eyes.
However, Kraken Zwei instantly wove her hair to deploy a shield. Powerful as it was, even Catastrophe could not weather mithril away instantly. Thus the red light was blocked.
Kraken Zwei generated dark matter again to create a silver shield. Once reinforced, the shield withstood Iris' attack completely.
"This is—still not enough."
Iris pulled away as a precaution against the enemy's counterattacks while raising her right arm. What gathered in her hand was not red light but pitch-black dark matter.
"Caduceus!"
The dark matter altered its form to become her fictional armament.
However, the fictional armament's outline grew distorted while its surface turned red. Increasing in size like a growing tree, it changed its shape ominously.
"More... More... Give me the greatest firepower, the 'eye' that can unleash Catastrophe all at once—"
Iris murmured emphatically and raised her staff. Her hand was already partially melded with the staff's shaft.
Transmutation... Rather, this was *biogenic transmutation*!
I knew that Iris was currently making a new organ, most likely for the sake of using Catastrophe's complete form.
But that action would completely deviate from humanity. An active choice to become a dragon.
Stop... now—
I clearly wanted to stop her, but my voice could not come out. My thoughts could not reach her.
"—Third Eye of Catastrophe!"

A gigantic red sphere sprouted from the front end of the transformed staff. An eerie and sinister pupil opened up in the center of the sphere.
"Gahhhhhhhhhhh!!"
Kraken Zwei wove her hair into a silver spear again. Generating dark matter and glowing purple in her eyes, she prepared to attack.
She fired a deadly attack.
"O catastrophe—Actualize!!"
At the same time, the "Third Eye" sprouted from the end of her staff released a massive volume of red light!
This red would color all creation of this world with destruction.
The green of forests, the blue of the sky, the silver of mithril, the purple eye—Everything became colored red only.
Immediately, time was stolen, finally ending in apocalyptic scenery.
A future where everything had weathered away into tiny particles.
After the red light passed, the land was turned into a vast wasteland of yellow sand.
Nothing with definite form remained.
"Success...?"
Iris stood as though leaning on her staff and looked around. There were no signs of Kraken Zwei.
"Mononobe—"
She faced me and smiled, but behind her, a tiny silver thread moved with a silver flash.
"—!"
I did not even have the time to speak out.
The silver flash bifurcated the "Third Eye" on the end of the staff. Out from the chopped open eyeball, bright red blood gushed out.
"Where—!?"
Covered in a rain of blood, Iris looked around her. Her neck and limbs were entangled with silver threads.
"Kyah!?"
The mithril threads suspended her in midair. Iris screamed. The source of the silver threads was underground.
The desertified ground surface swelled up, then Kraken Zwei reappeared, her body covered in silver threads.
Most likely, she had burrowed deep underground to evade Iris' Catastrophe.
"This, sort, of, level...!"
Iris struggled while her eyes lit up with red light. However, with her neck strangled tightly, the glow of Catastrophe dissipated.
The resilient mithril threads went as far as to suppress Iris' superhuman strength, completely depriving her of her freedom.
Crap—At this rate, Iris will...
In my haziness, I had no means to change the situation despite knowing the crisis she was in.
Damn it... Was there no solution? Some solution—

Anxiety and despair eroded my heart.
Like when facing me earlier, Kraken Zwei did not deliver the killing blow straight away. Instead, she pulled the restrained Iris over to in front of her.
"——"
After staring intently at Iris' left flank, the girl shredded Iris' already tattered jacket. Exposed as a result was her skin that showed red scales all over as well as the dragon mark that had lost its color.
What did she want—to do?
"Gahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"
Kraken Zwei covered Iris' dragon mark with her hand and roared. The girl's dragon mark on her forehead glowed purple. Iris' body convulsed.
"Ahhh... Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"
As though responding to the girl's roar, Iris screamed as well.
Originally recovered in color, Iris' dragon mark started to glow faintly.
"What..."
I watched the scene in a daze. The dragon mark gradually became colored again, turning purple—Kraken Zwei's color.
Iris was already close to a dragon. Rather than being the targeted side, she was gradually turning into the side that targeted others. However, Kraken Zwei was using brute force to make her submit—trying to make Iris her mate.
Out from the depths of my heart surged a different kind of fear from before.
—She was going to be taken away.
Iris... Someone whom I absolutely did not wish to lose, was going to be taken away.
Throb—
My heart pounded intensely. Sparks flew inside my brain
If Iris' dragon mark were to be colored completely, her form would change into the same "species" as Kraken Zwei, becoming her mate.
She was currently headed for a place out of my reach—becoming an existence that could no longer stay by my side.
Throb, throb—
As my heart rate grew faster, my heart was gradually devoured by pure emotion.
Forgetting anxiety, forgetting despair.
Forgetting pain, forgetting sadness.
Forgetting circumstances, forgetting helplessnes.
From an even deeper level than the "Fafnir" sunken in the depths of my subconscious, scorching feelings gushed out from basic instinct.
"Screw, this..."
By the time I realized, I had already stood up.
Feet that should not be able to move were planted on the ground. I stared at Kraken Zwei, the *enemy* who was trying to take away someone dear to me.
This emotion, driving my body and soul, I knew its name.

—Wrath.
A rising surge of pure emotion, rooted in basic instinct.
"Release... Iris."
I slowly raised my left hand and ordered her. The back of my hand—The dragon mark felt hot.
"Gururururu—"
Kraken Zwei faced me and growled. Iris' dragon mark was already 80% consumed by purple.
Wrong—she should not be marked by that kind of color.
I won't let her be marked by that kind of color!
Because—
"Release her—*She's mine*."
Throb!
The instant I declared emotionally, heat and light flooded out from the dragon mark on my left hand.
It was shining with clear blue light.
My dragon mark glowed blue while Iris' body also started to give off the same color—
About to be fully tainted with purple, Iris' dragon mark was now repainted blue.

"Mononobe..."
The restrained Iris called my name with a hazy look on her face.
"Gahhhh!?"
In pain, Kraken Zwei pressed her hand to her forehead. Her silver hair quivered like a wave as she tossed Iris to the ground.
From between Kraken Zwei's fingers, held to her forehead, two colors of light—purple and blue—were leaking out at the same time.
I did not know what had happened.
But I instinctively understood what I had done.
I had marked her—I marked Iris.
Refusing to hand Iris over to anyone, I wished to make her mine.
Hence, I marked her, doing the same thing as what dragons did.
I originally did not know I could do that.
However, once I had done it, I seemed to feel certain of my ability to do so.
"Ahhh... I get it now."
I muttered quietly and looked down at my dragon mark that was glowing blue.
So—I'm a dragon.
With that thought, everything made sense now.
Why was my dragon mark the only one exempt from color change? Why was I able to reject interference from Kraken Zwei, who had attempted to mark me? How could I mark Iris in this manner—
The answer was simple. Because the one closest to being a dragon was me.
More than Iris, more than Kraken Zwei, closer to being a dragon than anyone else.
"Guuuuuuuuuuuu!?"
Kraken Zwei held her forehead, still in pain.
Most likely, I had influenced her dragon mark when I marked Iris.
It was proof that Kraken Zwei was also a D, indicating that she was the one getting marked—A brand signifying such a meaning.
She was different from me. Surely, I—did not even count as a D.
Marking their mates, dyeing their targets with their own color, one-sided plunderers.
Solitary monsters without others of the same species.
But even if that were true, it did not matter as long as I could get Iris back!
"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"
Yelling, I rushed out.
I rushed over to Iris, who was lying on the ground, and Kraken Zwei, standing in front of her.
Power surged from the depths of my body. This was different from when I fought as "Fafnir"—It felt like my body had become a different existence.
"——"
Fear surfaced on the girl's face while the glowing dragon mark on her forehead was gradually painted with my color of blue.

Perhaps instinctively fearing contact with me, Kraken Zwei did not attack with her hair. Instead, she jumped back then her purple eye glowed.
She shot antimatter. Without slowing down, I extended my left hand.
I generated dark matter with precision, transmuting it into antigravitational matter, thereby deflecting the antimatter up in the air using the resulting repulsive field.
However, Kraken Zwei had seized that opportunity to generate dark matter. Using biogenic transmutation, she expanded her mithril hair a dozen fold, covering her entire body.
Then she used part of her hair like tentacles to wrap around Iris who was lying on the ground, pulling Iris towards her.
"Ugh... Guh... Mononobe..."
Despite moaning in pain, Iris still reached towards me.
"Iris!"
I called her name and summoned my fictional armament.
Kraken Zwei probably intended to flee with Iris but I was not going to let her succeed.
"Air Bullet!"
Firing a bullet of air underfoot to accelerate rapidly, I chased the receding Kraken Zwei.
Dark matter appeared in front of me. She was trying to intercept me by transmuting matter—But something of that level will not deter me!
"Smoke Bullet!"
I used thick smoke to erase the small particles of dark matter, interfering in her transmutation process. Since I had the same ability too, I knew its weaknesses well.
This alone was not enough to erase all of the dark matter. The projectile of fire created Kraken Zwei approached me.
"Antigravity!"
I used the last of the dark matter in my fictional armament, transmuting it into antigravitational matter, thereby deflecting the flame projectile with a small-scale repulsive field, then rushed past the smoke.
Just a bit before I reach Iris!
"Mononobe!!"
With tears in her eyes, she extended her left hand desperately.
"—Iris!!"
I reached out for Iris' fingertips with my left hand as well. The dragon mark on the back of my hand glowed with dazzling blue light.
Make contact!!
I grasped Iris' hand, which was covered with red scales.
In that instant—The light erupting from the dragon mark colored the entire area blue.

Part 3

Rustle...
I heard the sound of rustling among vegetation.
I woke up to find myself sprawled on the ground with the taste of soil in my mouth while my left hand—felt something warm.
"!?"
I looked up to see Iris' face next to me. I was holding hands tightly with her.
"Mmm..."
A faint breath escaped from between Iris' soft and tender lips. Her eyes slowly opened and met mine. Blue and clear, her eyes were the same as usual—
I realized suddenly in alarm and looked at her hand that I was holding tightly. The red scales on her skin were already gone.
"Iris! Your body!"
I sat up and checked her entire body. From gaps in the damaged jacket, I could see her delicate skin, the color of milk. I could not see any discoloration in her dragon mark either.
"Mononobe...? My body is—Wahhhhhh!?"
Realizing her chest was almost exposed, she instantly covered up frantically with her arms.
"Jeez... Mononobe, you're such a pervert."
Iris blushed and looked up at me shyly.
"Eh? Oh, no, sorry—I just wanted to say that your body has recovered, Iris."
I shifted my gaze away and hastily explained to her.
"Recovered...? Oh—It's true! The scales are gone!"
Only then did she finally realize her change and cheered.
"By the way, your eye color is also restored. You might not have noticed it yourself... But during the battle, Iris, your eyes were red."
Iris widened her eyes after listening to me, cocking her head in puzzlement.
"Why did I recover...? Say, what happened that? What about Kraken Zwei?"
These words prompted me to think about my situation. Although things had unfolded like a dream, but if this really was reality, then she should still be nearby—
After surveying my surroundings, I saw a pale foot under a tree's shade.
"That's..."

Iris and I exchanged a glance then stood up, supporting each other. My legs were quite weak while my left arm and flank were hurting intensely. After a moment's delay, I also felt pain on my back and the back of my head.
"Gah..."
The pain I had forgotten was attacking all at once. I gritted my teeth and endured. The fact that I could move seemed like a miracle already.
"Mononobe, are you okay? Oh my—Your back is all bloody!"
Lending me support, Iris called hoarsely.
"...I'm okay, although the injuries are not light... But not critical either. Right now, the important thing is to confirm that..."
I motioned with my eyes towards the pale foot I saw over at that giant tree.
"Hmm... Got it, let's go over together."
"Yeah, be careful."
I leaned against Iris' shoulder and walked slowly. We kept our distance from the target and circled around to peer from another side of the tree.
"Eh—"

Iris and I both gasped at the same time.
There a young girl, all naked, was collapsed in the bushes.
"Kraken Zwei..."
Her face was similar to Shinomiya-sensei's so we could not be mistaken, but one part of her was clearly different from before.
"Mononobe, her... hair—"
Just as Iris pointed out, the dramatic change had occurred in the girl's hair. Originally made of mithril, her hair used to be hard and silver... Now, it had turned into purple hair that seemed quite soft in texture. I bent down and tried to touch the tips of her hair—Her hair did not exhibit the hardness of metal.
Judging from her chest heaving slightly up and down, she was breathing, apparently asleep.
"What happened... She's almost like an ordinary—human's child."
Iris murmured in a daze.
I had a whole mountain of questions on my mind too but after seeing Iris restored to human appearance and Kraken Zwei's loss of mithril hair, I came up with a hypothesis.
"Iris—I think I marked you."
I quietly said to her.
"Huh?"
Iris looked at me, quite perplexed.
"I didn't want you to be taken away... I didn't want to hand you over to anyone. Those thoughts, those impulses overflowed and gushed out. By the time I realized, Iris, your dragon mark had already turned into my color."
I glanced at my left hand's dragon mark and confessed to her what I had done.
Iris immediately showed a little smile and held her hand against her dragon mark.
"I see... So that's what happened."
"—Aren't you shocked? I thought what I said would probably be quite far-fetched."
Seeing Iris accept my explanation so easily, I could not help but feel doubt.
"Because I have faint memories of it. Back then, the moment just before Kraken Zwei would've finished marking me... I heard your voice, Mononobe, then my dragon mark heated up. I felt your extremely strong feelings, Mononobe... It made me really happy."
Iris blushed and stared at me from extremely up close.
"What..."
I felt my face heat up. With my attention drawn to Iris' moist eyes—I forgot what to say.
"Then... Mononobe, you came to save me. The instant you held my hand tightly—the dragon mark grew even hotter and the heat spread throughout my body. It was like you were embracing me... I felt very blissful."

Iris recounted excitedly with joy, lifting her right hand whose scales had disappeared.
"That's as far as I remember. When I woke up again, I was already like this, so I had a faint feeling that you were the one who cured me, Mononobe."
"R-Really...? But you're probably correct."
Feeling very embarrassed, I could not look squarely at Iris' face, so I turned to different direction while I spoke.
"Huh?"
"Someone marked by a dragon, to become its mate—will transform into a dragon of the same kind."
In response to Iris, who was tilting her head in puzzlement, I recited what we had heard countless times during class back in Midgard.
"Is there anything wrong with that?"
"You don't get it? The following is just my speculation—I marked you, Iris, then by touching your body, I turned you into my own kind."
"Eh? Eh...? Eh—"
Iris blinked in confoundment, perhaps because her comprehension rate could not keep up with the conversation, but gradually, her face turned red.
"U-Umm, then in other words—Right now, I... am your mate, Mononobe?"
"Huh—?"
This time, it was my turn to be put in tough spot. Indeed, on further thought, that was true.
"N-No good, Mononobe! So suddenly... I still haven't prepared myself... A-And you still have Mitsuki, Mononobe—"
Iris began to panic but she suddenly stopped her motions. Her gaze went over to Kraken Zwei who was lying in the bush.
"H-Hold on! Come to think of it, this child turning back to a human appearance is—"
Iris went pale and said in astonishment.
"Yeah, probably because I marked her. In the last moment, Kraken Zwei's dragon mark had almost changed color completely, so the phenomenon of 'transforming into the same kind' happened to her in addition to you."
I nodded in affirmation and voiced my hypothesis. In that case, things basically made sense.
The problem was, having become my kind, could the two of them still be considered "ordinary humans"?
Unless I found out what my real identity was, then there was no answer.
"Uh... Umm... Simply stated, that means you immediately had an affair, Mononobe? You clearly turned me into your mate, but you're two-timing with this child!?"
"Huh?"
However, Iris' accusation had nothing to do with my concerns. Angrily, she denounced me.
"A-And she's only a newborn child, you know? M-Mononobe, you pervert!"

"W-Wait! I think Kraken Zwei's dragon mark was affected because she was next to you, Iris... And she turned back to human like this—"
I frantically explained but when I said the words "turned back to human," I shut my mouth because it made me think of something.
Perhaps feeling my emotions, Iris also put on a solemn expression and stared at the sleeping girl.
"Has she really... turned human?"
Iris asked with wariness in her gaze and tone.
"Well—I don't know."
I answered Iris hesitantly. It was also possible she might fire antimatter at us as soon as she woke up. Despite losing her mithril hair, her ability to generate dark matter was most likely intact.
Because her dragon mark, having lost color, could still be seen faintly on her forehead.
And she... had killed Shinomiya-sensei. Having left such a massive gulf to bridge after the battle, to regard her as a target for protection was extremely difficult.
Rustle—!
Just as I was pondering how to handle the girl, the bushes on the side shook—A blonde girl appeared.
"Jeanne! I'm so glad you're okay—"
Although covered in wounds with burns left on parts of her clothing, Jeanne looked like she had no major injuries.
"Oh... Captain~ You are fine—!?"
Jeanne looked at me in relief but gasped when she saw Kraken Zwei, lying on the ground.
"...Are you alright!? Hang in there!"
Jeanne ran towards the girl without any hesitation, picking up the sleeping girl in her arms.
"Wait, it's still very dangerous!"
I hastily warned her but Jeanne was unconcerned. After examining the girl's condition and confirming she was unhurt, Jeanne took off her own jacket to cover up the girl.
"Don't worry—Captain, you two please keep your distance."
Jeanne shook her head with an expression of resolve. She hugged the girl tightly.
"Until the very end, I will continue to be this child's good fortune."
"Jeanne..."
Seeing her determination, I understood it would be a waste of breath to argue.
"Mmm..."
At this moment, Kraken Zwei moaned slightly and her eyelids twitched. Then she slowly opened her eyes.
The images of Jeanne, Iris and I were reflected in those purple eyes.

I gulped and focused my mind so that I could summon my fictional armament instantly in an emergency.
While we watched in concern, tears flowed out of the purple eyes.
"Ooh... Oooooh.... Ooowahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"
Kraken Zwei began to cry loudly.
The girl clung to Jeanne's bosom, clutching her clothing tightly and bawling like a baby.
"It's okay... You're no longer alone. I will always stay with you from now on."
Stroking the girl's soft hair, Jeanne spoke gently to her.
Kraken Zwei's impulse to seek mates might have disappeared as a result of losing her traits as a dragon. Or perhaps Jeanne's body warmth had reminded her of the precious feelings she had forgotten.
I did not know which was the correct answer but upon witnessing this scene, I understood that there was no longer any *enemy* here.
"She is... human, right? That child is already—"
Iris smiled and asked me.
"...Yeah."
I nodded deeply in agreement. Then just at that moment, my tense consciousness broke off.
Instantly, my entire body lost strength and my mind went hazy.
"M-Mononobe!??
With Iris propping me up, I fell unconscious.
It had not been easy... but with this, the incident finally came to a close.
This was definitely not the best outcome, because I—we—had lost someone irreplaceable.
However... In the end, we managed to retrieve what Shinomiya-sensei had refused to abandon throughout the whole time.
Hence—
"—Mononobe Yuu, you did very well. Most sincerely... You have my gratitude."
Just before I sank into deep slumber, I seemed to hear a voice, one that could not possibly be heard again—

Epilogue

Batabatabatabata—
A low and heavy sound... The noise of propeller blades. feeling minor vibrations from under my body, I opened my eyes to see a ceiling of metal. I seemed to be lying on a spacious seat.
Next to my pillow was a black-haired woman in a suit. She was Shinomiya Haruka, Midgard's commander as well as the homeroom teacher of Brynhildr Class.
She smiled gently when she saw me wake up.
"—So you have woken, Mononobe Yuu?"
I looked up blankly at Shinomiya-sensei's face, unable to comprehend the situation, because she was no longer supposed to be in this world.
"Is this a dream... No, is this heaven?"
Half-seriously, I thought I had died just like that, so I asked her this question.
"Haha, indeed, we are currently in the sky—But that's a bit different from heaven."
Finding it funny, she laughed then motioned to the window with her gaze. What I saw on the other side was endless blue.
I sat up and peered out the window, only to see a carpet of velvety clouds below. We seemed to be flying at quite a high altitude right now.
"This is the interior of a large helicopter. We are on our way back to Midgard."
"Huh...?"
On our way back to Midgard? Hearing such down-to-earth words, I was slightly taken aback.
"What's the matter? Do your injuries hurt? Although necessary treatment has been applied, if the pain is severe, you could take some painkillers—"
Saying that, Shinomiya-sensei took out the medical kit from under her seat.
I shook my head frantically.
"N-No, my wounds—although they hurt a bit, it's not impossible to bear. Rather... Shinomiya-sensei, are you really Shinomiya-sensei?"
"...? What are you talking about? Just as you can see, I am myself. Did you hit your head somewhere?"
Shinomiya-sensei examined my face in worry and reached out to feel my forehead. That warm and soft palm made my heart race—The warmth of life from her hand made me gasp.

"Why... Shinomiya-sensei, back then, you definitely—"
Skewered in the torso by Kraken Zwei, Shinomiya-sensei had definitely stopped breathing. It was a fatal wound, impossible to cure.
"Ahhh. I see now—No wonder you look like you've seen a ghost. Don't worry, I am assuredly alive."
Shinomiya-sensei figured out my question and smiled gently at me.
"B-But..."
I looked at her abdomen, which did not seem to be bandaged. So this was a dream after all?
"Well, to be honest—I originally didn't think I'd survive a large hole in my body either. However, the principal's blood turned out to be more potent than I imagined."
"The principal's... blood?"
I frowned, unsure what was going on.
"She—Charlotte B. Lord—is no ordinary human. You know this already, right?"
Immediately, Shinomiya-sensei looked at me with a solemn expression.
"Y-Yes, she is the gray dragon—'Gray' Vampire..."
Given Shinomiya-sensei's position, it would be only natural for her to know, but I still answered nervously.
"Indeed. Through her bodily fluids as a medium, she can invoke many powers, such as healing wounds or exerting control... She should have looked after you previously too."
Indeed, I had received the principal's aid to heal the injuries caused by Yggdrasil's clone and to prevent me from coming under Yggdrasil's control.
"And in my case, I am a special follower whose body has taken in her blood directly. Upon becoming Midgard's commander, she and I entered a blood pact."
"Taken in her blood... In other words, that's—"
I finally understood why Shinomiya-sensei had survived.
"Yes. Although not to the point of the principal's eternal youth and longevity, my ability to heal greatly surpasses normal people. I survived this time thanks to that."
Hearing her say that, I was finally able to accept the current situation as reality.
It was neither my wishful dream nor heaven. Instead, we were definitely alive, talking to each other.
"...!"
Wanting to confirm that Shinomiya-sensei definitely existed, I clasped her hand tightly with both hands.
Soft and warm, it was a beautiful woman's palm, slightly smaller than mine.
"H-Hey, Mononobe Yuu, a man should not hold a woman's hand so lightly—"
Blushing, Shinomiya-sensei was flustered in a rare display. Her voice heightened a bit in pitch.

She was definitely alive, showing an expression I had never known, and definitely not an inhabitant of my dreams.
"Thank goodness... I'm so glad..."
Holding her hand tightly, I lowered my head with tears spilling out, sobbing uncontrollably.
"You really are—too kind."
Shinomiya-sensei smiled wryly as she spoke, using her other hand to gently stroke my hair.
"However, you do not need to worry about me. Show those girls, who've been worrying about you the whole time, how healthy you are."
Saying that, Shinomiya-sensei gently struggled free of my grasp and stood up.
She approached the room's partition and slid a metal window sideways. Behind it was a glass window but I could see what lay behind it.
The girls were sitting in opposite facing seats. The members of Brynhildr Class, Kili, Vritra, Jeanne, and a young girl who resembled Shinomiya-sensei—
"Everyone, Mononobe Yuu has awoke."
Shinomiya-sensei called to the other side of the window, immediately causing a clamor to spread.
"Really!? Mononobe woke up!?"
Iris and the girls all rushed to the side of the window. I was relieved to see Lisa and the others, who had lost contact during the battle, were there.
Meanwhile, I also noticed something strange about my situation.
Taking a closer look, I saw that there many small round holes in the window to allow conversation.
A narrow room, a sturdy looking steel door, a window to allow talking without going out—This was virtually a jail cell.
"Nii-san!"
However, my doubts instantly dispersed upon hearing my younger sister's voice.
"Mitsuki, you woke up!?"
I approached the window too to confirm the sight of Mitsuki, safe and sound. Having slept continuously for several days, her face looked healthy in color.
"Yes... Not too long ago. Nii-san, you are always so reckless... I was honestly so worried. Also—"
After wiping tears from the corners of her eyes, Mitsuki pressed her hand against the back of neck, which was the location of her dragon mark. Upon closer examination, I noticed that the others were also holding parts of their body with mixed expressions.
Blushing faintly, Firill had her hand on her left shoulder. Ariella was holding her lower abdomen with slight displeasure. Ren had her hand on her chest area solemnly. Tia was holding her thigh with a smile all over her face. Lisa had her hand on bottom, her face gone bright red.

Everyone was covering the respective location of their dragon mark.
"What's wrong? Did something unusual happen to the dragon marks?"
I asked, only to see Iris standing up, pouting.
"How can you ask what's wrong when this is all your fault, Mononobe? I thought you were just two-timing between me and Zwei-chan, but it turns out you didn't stop there and went for everyone—Mononobe, you're so unfaithful..."
She glared at me coldly, but I did not know what had happened.
"Captain... This is something that not even I can't defend you."
Holding the young girl's hand, Jeanne approached, sighing as she spoke.
"Even you too, Jeanne—By the way, that child is Kraken Zwei... Right? Is this okay—for her to be with everyone?"
"Yes, she listens to me obediently now. Come, Zwei, say hello."
Urged by Jeanne, the purple-haired girl took a step forward and bowed as a greeting.
"—hEl-Lo."
Although a bit stiffly, Kraken Zwei greeted me in Japanese. Watching her do that, Jeanne looked proud as though something good had happened.
Shinomiya-sensei was also by my side, smiled gently at Kraken Zwei.
Lots of things had probably happened while I was asleep, but it looked like there was nothing to worry about.
"Look, she has learned how to greet others. This child will be going to Midgard as a D, rather than as a dragon. With nowhere for me to go, I will come along as well. That's basically it."
Jeanne scratched her head, then as though she suddenly remembered, pointed at Kili and Vritra behind her.
"Oh, those two are coming along too."
"Putting aside the restrained Vritra... I'm surprised Kili is willing to come with us."
I looked at her in surprise. Last time when she had sought Midgard's aid, Kili had vanished in the end. But this time, why—
Seeing my expression, Kili smiled with joy and approached the window. Quietly, she whispered:
"It's only natural that I follow you, Yuu. Because right now—I am your mate."
"Huh...?"
I was perplexed, only to see Kili raise her right hand, presenting it before me. The dragon mark appearing on the back of her hand—had turned blue.
"—!"
I gasped in surprise.
"Not just Kili! Tia too!"
Tia lifted her skirt slightly to show me the dragon mark on her thigh. Likewise, its color was—bright blue.
"Don't tell me—it's the same for everyone?"
I frantically looked at the others in turn.

"Yes, me too."
With her hand on her shoulder, Firill nodded.
"Yeah, same here."
"Mm..."
Ariella and Ren nodded in confirmation with their hands on their respective dragon marks.
"—The same goes for me. Umm, although I cannot show you here... My dragon mark has turned blue too."
With her hand on her bottom, Lisa glared at me, blushing to her ears. Then Mitsuki lifted her hair and showed me her neck.
"My dragon mark too... has been dyed with your color, Nii-san."
"Even Mitsuki..."
Unable to understand the situation immediately, I stood stunned on the spot.
Then Shinomiya-sensei patted me on the shoulder.
"—I have already heard Iris Freyja's account of how Kraken Zwei turned back to human. She said that by marking her—turning her into your mate—you had turned her into a human like yourself."
"Y-Yes... But that's purely speculation."
Unable to control the faltering in my heart, I confirmed what Shinomiya-sensei had brought up.
"Simultaneous to when you marked Iris Freyja and Kraken Zwei, the sniping team headed by Lisa Highwalker also had their dragon marks turned blue, apparently. Even Ariella Lu and the others, who were farther away in position, also had their dragon marks turn from purple to blue."
"What... The area of effect was so wide..."
Iris was the only one I had marked by my own volition. I originally thought that Kraken Zwei's dragon mark had changed color simply from being caught in the wake next to Iris—But never did I expect even Lisa and the rest of the girls to be affected.
"After you made contact with Iris Freyja and Kraken Zwei, the colors of their dragon marks had vanished. Their bodies also show no anomalous symptoms. However, since your effect on those whose dragon marks had changed color is as yet uncertain, you will be placed in isolation for now."
Shinomiya-sensei calmly explained the situation to me.
"Oh... So that's why I was sleeping in what looks like a jail cell."
I commented after figuring out the situation. Shinomiya-sensei made an apologetic expression.
"Sorry, I do not wish to subject you to imprisonment... when clearly you are—my niece's savior."
"No, please don't feel bothered. I believe your judgment is correct, Shinomiya-sensei, because I also don't understand what happened—or what I've done."
I laughed wryly and turned my gaze to the dragon mark on my left hand.

Perhaps reacting to the girls' dragon marks, mine was showing a slight color of blue.
By turning Iris and Kraken Zwei into "my kind," that did not necessarily mean they had become human. It was impossible to predict what effects there might be from now on.
"Personally, I'd like to touch Yuu as soon as possible—to let him turn me into his real mate. I'll simply break this window."
However, Kili shrugged nonchalantly and stared at the window half-seriously.
"Kili-san, please do not act on impulse and cause destruction. I am the one... who wants to confirm Nii-san's safety directly."
While warning Kili, Mitsuki also showed impatience. Seeing this situation, Iris huddled herself apologetically.
"Y-You're right. Sorry... Mitsuki-chan."
"Why is it you, instead of Kili-san, who is apologizing to me, Iris-san?
"B-Because... I touched Mononobe first... Actually you should be first, Mitsuki-chan—No, you should be the only one..."
Iris looked down and placed her hand over her dragon mark on her flank.
"Iris-san, here you go with such words again... I have repeated myself many times already, Nii-san and Iris-san will—
"N-No! Mononobe and Mitsuki will—"
Iris and Mitsuki started to repeat a dispute as before.
"H-Hey, you two—"
I frantically tried to stop them, but with the window and wall in the way, I could only shout at them.
"Hey, Mononobe-kun."
Firill quickly approached the window and called to me quietly.
"By marking me... It means that you have resolved yourself properly to become a prince, right?"
"Uhh..."
I was rendered speechless by her serious gaze. Even though it was unintentional, the fact I marked her was the truth, so I could not deny it.
"Wait, Firill, I feel sorry for Mononobe-kun if you force him like that."
However, overhearing the conversation, Ariella came over and defended me.
"Mm... Onii-chan feels troubled."
Ren also joined in the rescue from behind Ariella.
"Oh... Then you two don't need Mononobe-kun to take responsibility for you?"
Nevertheless, Firill grinned malevolently and asked, causing the two girls to act awkwardly.
"No, umm... I'd also... hope he'd take a bit of responsibility."
"No problem... Onii-chan is a responsible man."
Ariella scratched her face in embarrassment whereas Ren looked me with eyes filled with trust.

"That's right! Yuu will take Tia as wife! Right, husband?"
Even Tia joined in at this time. Everyone's gaze gathered on me.
"Uh, umm..."
The pressure from everyone was making me break out in cold sweat. At this moment, Lisa pointed at me through the window and declared as though pouring fuel on the fire.
"Mononobe Yuu! I will have you know that I intend for you to take responsibility for marking me! With this... blue bottom, how do you expect me to get married!?"
"I-I understand. Responsibility aside, I'll definitely find a solution for the bottom problem no matter what!"
I frantically nodded and agreed. For some reason, Lisa's face remained red.
"D-Do not use such a weird description!"
"But Lisa, you're the one who brought it up, right!?"
While we were talking noisily like this, Iris and Mitsuki, who were arguing in the background, looked over to us in surprise.
"Hey... Mitsuki-chan, this doesn't feel like the time for us to be yielding to each other..."
"My sentiments precisely... Iris-san. At this rate, things might develop into a bad direction."
After such an exchange, the two girls laughed at the same time.
"Ahaha... What are we doing?"
"Fufu—Indeed. To think that we were trying to decide on our own... like fools."
A murky situation with an unknown future ahead of us.
However, for some reason, after seeing Iris and Mitsuki laughing like that, I could not help but smile, feeling that things were not so bad right now.

*

That night—inside the large transport helicopter heading to Midgard—the task that Tia Lightning had been carrying out cautiously so far, *synchronization with Yggdrasil*, was finally complete.

Sitting in their seats, everyone else was asleep, leaning on one another's shoulder. Despite resting her head against Lisa next to her, Tia opened her eyes slightly and started to search for information.

"Black" Vritra had come to seek negotiations, even at the cost of taking on human form. Tia searched, wanting to know why.

Data... Searching—

With the sound of sparks, lightning flashed around Tia's horns.

Throwing herself into an overwhelming flood of information, she searched for necessary information—Disconcerting information.

—Dragon... Gaia—infinite prison of realms... Counterdragons—

Eight past calamities—crises of destruction—

The flood of information, flowing in the form of electronic signals, projected images of calamities in Tia's mind.

Images of destruction were gradually built.

First was the infernal realm bringing lives to an end. The First Dragon—"Hell" Gehenna.

Next was the visitor transcending infinity. The Second Dragon—"Ultimate Wisdom" Atlantis.

Third was the twilight devouring the gods. The Third Dragon—"True Obliteration" Ragnarok.

Fourth was the unstoppable quaking. The Fourth Dragon—"Heavy Tremor" Nova.

Fifth was absolute life of singular completion. The Fifth Dragon—"Eternal Longevity" Bahamut.

Sixth was chaos of indeterminacy. The Sixth Dragon—"Anomalous Dawn" Nyarlathotep.

Seventh was a surging swell of violence. The Seventh Dragon—"Disasterification" Apocalypse.

Eighth was wisdom that had returned. The Eighth Dragon—"Transcendent Soul" Humanoid.

Then, future destruction... A promised conclusion—

The Ninth Dragon—!

"!!"

After comprehending everything, Tia opened her eyes.

Then she noticed the presence of the girl sitting opposite her, staring at her the entire time.

The black-haired girl whose body was imprisoned by a plant's vine—Vritra—spoke to her in a solemn tone of voice.

"'Tis apparent... Thou hast finally grasped the situation."

Tia nodded silently. She could not speak because the truth was too shocking.

As though reading Tia's mind, Vritra continued:
"Yes—Time is in short supply."
Residing in the girl's eyes was despair towards the inescapable future.
"Very soon, all life on Gaia shall face extinction—Destroyed by a *true dragon*."

Afterword

This is Tsukasa. It'll be April by the time this Volume 8 of Unlimited Fafnir, *Amethyst Rebirth*, is released, but right now, when I'm writing this afterword with my feet feeling cold, I really hope the weather will get warmer sooner.

However, there will be pollen in the air during spring, right...? For someone like me who's susceptible to both colds and hay fever, spring is such a happy yet suffering season.

Then in April, the anime's broadcast would have ended. How did you feel about the world of Fafnir depicted by the anime? I am honestly overjoyed just simply from seeing Iris, Mitsuki and the others in motion. I also found it very enjoyable to learn about the anime production process.

Due to the limited edition of this Volume 8, I had a chance to write a drama CD script, giving me a very valuable experience. Because this volume was packed with tense plot, I tried to write something fun and relaxing as much as possible, to craft a story that people could listen to again and again.

Anime is about having voice actors perform a script written by the screenplay writer, but for a drama CD, the story I wrote would become the script directly, so I felt quite embarrassed during the recording process. My heart was pounding uncontrollably the whole time.

Even the same words would bring about different feelings depending on different acting. I was truly surprised to learn that so much information was packed into every syllable. And in anime, the addition of images is a major factor, thereby vastly increasing character information of Iris and the others, massively adding to their sense of presence.

Then during the development of these media franchises, the greatest assets I gained was the chance to interact and work with so many different people. If you stick to writing novels, you basically interact with just your editor alone, thus only getting a blurry understanding of the broader industry. But this time, I was lucky enough to be invited to many different scenes, allowing me to witness so many things with my own eyes. I will continue to work hard so that I can continue to interact with the world like this!

—Oh, it feels like I'm writing an impressions essay. It's time for me to talk about the story in the main series but there might not be enough space left.

This Volume 8 is a major turning point where I wrote many scenes and situations that I've been wanting to do since a long time ago.

Next, many mysteries will be unraveled and the story will develop towards an even greater climax, so please look forward to Volume 9.

Well then, time for acknowledgements.

Korie Riko-sensei, thank you so much again for your lovely illustrations this time! Jeanne's bath scene really made me blush with excitement. You also helped the anime broadcast with your promotional illustrations, I am so happy. First credit belongs to Korie Riko-sensei for making Iris and the others into attractive characters.

Editor in charge, Jouji-sama. Thank you for doing so much promotion on my behalf for the anime. Thanks to yo, I was able to maintain my pace and finish this Volume 8. Looking forward to your continued care!

Then my thanks goes to all staff who took part in producing the novel, the manga and the anime.

Though the anime has ended, this novel and its manga adaptation will still continue! The manga illustrates the feelings of Yuu and the others in great detail, making you feel like you're in the thick of things. Even after watching the anime, the manga can still help you to enjoy the story even more, so please have a read!

Finally a word to all readers—Thank you for reading and supporting this work.

Well then, see you next time.

Tsukasa, February 2015

Illustrator's Afterword

あとがき

ジャンヌちゃん。
性別
バレバレでした。

Jeanne-chan, your gender is very obvious.
Korie Riko

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